

## What Good Does Freaking Out Do? by GreenLily474

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Family, Hurt-Comfort

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B., Will B.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-05-20 04:44:21

**Updated:** 2019-01-05 12:17:21

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 20:00:43

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 9

**Words:** 44,311

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Not wanting to worry Will and Eleven, Joyce and Hopper keep a secret from them that they learn anyway because they're concerned. The family also learns that the events of 1983-1985 affected the health of one of the siblings more than they initially realized. same continuity as MKUltra Ripple

# 1. Chapter 1

*AN: a lot of the back story for this fic is in MKUltra Ripple. There are some major spoilers for that fic in this one. If you haven't read it yet, well it's fan fiction and the world will keep turning. This is a much shorter and simpler story though.*

## Chapter One

Will Byers sat on his bed working on an essay for his English class on a perfectly normal Tuesday evening. Hopper and his mother had told Will and his sister Eleven (El) that they had to take care of something out of town and they'd be home late. El was in her own room working on her own essay, which Will had promised to check when she was finished. The phone rang around 5:15 pm and Will picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Bud, how's it going?"

"Jonathan!" Will exclaimed happily. "What's going on? How's NYU?"

"Pretty awesome. There are a lot of people here who are just as weird, if not weirder than I am. And my classes are a lot more interesting. Is Mom home?"

"She and Hopper had to take care of something in Bloomington. They said they'll be out late. El's working on an English essay in her room."

"That's cool. I've only got five minutes on this calling card and you're the person I really wanted to talk to the most anyway. I miss you, bud."

"I miss you too, but I'm glad you're enjoying NYU. Do you think I could visit soon?"

"I hope so. You could even bring Mike and El. El could stay with Nancy in her dorm room. I could take you to the Met. You'd love it."

"Cool. Mr. Barnes said that if the decathlon team makes the top five

in the state, we can go to the nationals in New York City next spring, so that could be another trip."

"Yeah, that'd be great," said Jonathan. "So how's it going with the homecoming float? Are you and Julie going to let someone else win this year."

"No way," said Will. "We decided that we're going for a clean sweep and winning every year. Julie and I also decided to enter a writing contest together. We'd write and illustrate a children's book. If we win, our book gets published."

"That sounds pretty amazing," said Jonathan. "I think you'll win. Those pictures you sent me are getting a lot of compliments. I guy I know who has a band wants you to design his album cover."

"Yeah, right!"

"Will, I'm serious. Your drawings are really good and people like them a lot."

"Thanks, Jonathan."

There was a beeping sound on the phone. "Shit, time's almost, up," said Jonathan. "I'll try to call again soon. Tell everyone I said hi. I love you."

"I love you too."

Will hopped off his bed and went over to Eleven's room. His dog Chester and cat Luke started to follow. Will knocked on the door to his sister's room. He wanted to tell her about the possible trick to New York. She'd be really excited about it, especially if Mike came.

"El? Hey Jonathan was just on the phone. We were talking about going to New York and Mike coming with us. El? You in there?"

Eleven opened the door. She looked frazzled and her nose was bleeding slightly. "What's going on? Are you alright?" asked Will.

"I'm ok," said Eleven. "I wanted to see what Mom and Dad were doing. They were acting weird when they left this afternoon."

"What is it? Are they ok?"

"Come in, I'll show you." Eleven grabbed Will's wrist and pulled him into her room. She had borrowed his Supercom and Will had assumed she'd been using it to talk to Mike. She and Will sat down on the floor. Eleven closed her eyes and Will follow suit. She held her brother's hand and his mind was pulled into her vision.

Initially, Eleven could only see Hopper when she went into the void that night, but connecting to her brother's powers enhanced her own. She could now see the Hopper was in a room with a blonde haired woman and a teenage girl who was around Eleven and Will's age. Her hair was blonde as well. It appeared to be growing back after her head had been shaved.

*"I was in that place all those years! They made me into a weapon. I just kept hoping that you were looking for me, that you'd come. But you both just forgot about me!"*

*"Sara, honey, we never forgot about you. We thought you were dead. They did a very convincing job," said Hopper. "If we'd known, there's nothing that would have stopped us from finding you."*

*"I haven't been Sara for a long time!" Sara held up her wrist. It had a "9" tattoo on it. "And it's time to go now. I'll see you two later."*

*"Sara, please!" said the blonde woman next to Hopper.*

*"Goodbye," said Sara. She walked through a door. Hopper and the blonde woman sat in silence for a few seconds.*

*"She'll never forgive us," said the blonde woman.*

*"She will, Diane. She's been going through hell for eight years. They took her from us. These bastards took a lot of kids from their parents." Hopper and Diane stood up and started walking down a hallway.*

*"A lot of kids? Like that little girl you adopted to replace Sara? Like Sara was nothing?"*

*Hopper stopped and glared at Diane. "I didn't just adopt El to replace Sara. Were you replacing Sara when you had Elizabeth with Bill?"*

*"That was different, Jim! Elizabeth is my own flesh and blood, not some kid I found in the woods!"*

*Hopper grabbed Diane's wrist angrily. "It's not different to me. I love El more than I ever thought I could love a kid that wasn't Sara; but don't think for a second that I've ever gotten past the pain of losing out little girl. I've lived with it every second of every day. But she's been alive this whole time. It's a miracle. If we give her patience she has a shot at the life we always wanted for her."*

*"I'm sorry, Jim. That was uncalled for."*

*"It's ok," said Hopper as he let go of Diane's wrist. "It's an emotional time for us. The important thing is that we're there for Sara."*

*"Do you really think your new wife can help with this?"*

*"I do. These bastards faked Will's death and tried to take him like they took Sara. Joyce understands and she'll help however she can."*

Will suddenly broke the connection. He felt a slight pain in his chest and had a shortness of breath.

"Are you ok, Will?" asked Eleven. Will rubbed his forehead as he took a couple of deep breaths.

"I'm fine," said Will as Chester whimpered and put his head in Will's lap. Will absently patted the canine's head.

"Sara, she's...not gone. Why didn't they tell us?"

"They probably just didn't want to worry us," said Will. "It looks like she has some PTSD or something and they're waiting until she gets better before they tell us."

"Maybe we can help her," said Eleven.

"Yeah, maybe, but we should probably let them tell us when they're ready," said Will as he messaged his chest.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"She hates me, Joyce, she thinks I abandoned her," said Hopper as Joyce drove off of the highway to the Hawkins exit.

"She doesn't hate you. She's just been through a lot and she's angry. It'll take time, but she'll understand."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes I'm sure, because you'll never give up on her."

"But I did. They faked her death and I fell for it."

"They did a really convincing job and she *had* been sick for a while. No one can fault you for falling for it."

"They pulled the same crap with Will and you didn't fall for it Joyce. If I had half of your parental instincts, Sara never would have spent so long being turned into a weapon."

"I should have listened to my instincts when Will and El were born. Maybe Will and Jonathan would have had their sister growing up with them and I could have gotten rid of Lonnie a lot sooner."

"They would have just turned your brain to mush like they did to Terry Ives and taken Will too."

"They would have done the same for you if you'd looked for Sara," said Joyce as she pulled into the driveway. "We can't change the past, but we can make a better future for all of our children."

Joyce and Hopper walked hand in hand to their house. As they opened the front door, they saw Will and Eleven sitting on the couch in the living room. Plates with half eaten grilled cheese sandwiches sat on front of them on the coffee table.

"Hey," said Will. "How did everything go in Bloomington."

"Fine," said Joyce as she approached her children and kissed them on their foreheads. "Are you two alright? You both look a little pale." She felt Eleven's forehead and cheeks. Hopper walked up behind her looking concerned. She felt Will's cheeks and forehead. "Will, honey, you feel clammy."

"I'm fine, Mom. It's just that.. Writing that Essay for English was a little stressful, but we're both finished with it and just relaxing," said Will.

"Are you sure."

"Positive. Oh, by the way, Jonathan called. He told me to tell everyone hello."

## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter Two

"Sam? What's going on? Did something happen to Sara?" asked Hopper as he opened the door to find Sam Owens standing on his front porch.

"No, this isn't about Sara," said Dr. Owens. Joyce walked up behind Hopper and Dr. Owens looked directly at her. "It's about Will. I had a gut feeling that we were missing something on his tests all this month, so I had Scott Clarke take a look. He found some slight scarring on Will's left ventricle." Dr. Owens handed Joyce the file and she started reading the chart. "Now we can fix this and we have time, but we should probably get him on the transplant list as soon as possible to be safe."

"What caused this?" ask Hopper as he gestured for Dr. Owens to come inside. "Should we worry about El?"

"El seems to be alright so far, but after everything she went through under Brenner's control all those years, I'd like to keep running tests to be safe. We're doing the same for Sara. Scott Clarke, myself and a few others we've consulted seem to agree that Will put a lot of strain on himself when he opened too portals. It takes a significant amount of energy to open a portal to another part of our world, but opening one to another dimension...That happened after he was stuck in the Upside Down for a week and possessed by an interdimensional entity."

"I'm going to get a second opinion," said Joyce.

"I understand," said Doctor Owens. "But we're here to help and we'll get Will on that list."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Hey, are you two coming?" asked Mike as he peaked his head into the room when Will and Julie were cleaning paint off their faces. Eleven stood with Mike and giggled at the mess. "Your mom and



Hopper are expecting us for dinner and I don't plan of keeping the chief of police waiting. Who knows what he'll do if we piss him off!"

"Well, he did say he'd feed you to dogs if you ever brought El home late," said Will as he wiped his hands and face with a paper towel and Julie did the same.

"Do you two think you can get more paint on the decorations that you do on each other?" asked Mike as he decided to change the subject.

"I'll have you know, Wheeler, we're in a serious competition!" said Will.

"Oh yeah? What's the prize?" asked Mike.

"The best prize of all," said Julie. "Bragging rights!"

"That's a pretty good prize," said Eleven. She looked from Mike to Will to Julie. "Is that good banter I just did?"

"Yeah, you're getting the hang of it," said Will with an encouraging smile.

"You still have paint in your hair," Mike told Will as he pointed to a tuft of hair that was standing off of his best friend's head. Will reached up and felt the spot where Mike was pointing.

"I'll wash it out when we get home."

"We can wait if you want to take care of it now," said Mike.

"That's ok. My mom will freak if I ride home with wet hair when it's under 70 degrees," said Will. "Did you brings Nancy's old cards from Kaminski's class for tonight?"

"Sure did," said Mike as he patted his back pack. They all had a chemistry test the next day. The four of them had formed a study group. Julie's parents were less inquisitive when she went over to Will's house if Eleven was there and the Wheelers were the same about Mike going to study with El if Will was also there. Their parents seemed to live under the assumption that none of them could

control their hormones.

They were all laughing and chatting as they arrived at the Byers-Hopper home. Joyce and Hopper had both been taking cooking tips from Karen Wheeler and trying to provide healthy meals for their children, especially since Jonathan was away at college.

Will noticed his mother and step father looking upset as they sat in the living room. He exchanged a glance with Eleven. Even without using telepathy he could tell that, like him, she was wondering if something had happened with Sara.

"Is everything alright?" Will asked his parents tentatively. Joyce looked up with tears in her eyes. She crossed the room and pulled her son into a tight embrace. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"There's something we have to tell you, buddy," said Hopper as he walked over and gave Eleven's shoulder a squeeze. Mike and Julie can stick around and hear this if want, it's up to you."

It must not have had anything to do with Sara. "Of course I want them to stay. What's going on? Did something happen to Jonathan?"

"Jonathan's fine, honey," said Joyce. "Doctor Owens came by today and they found something on one of your tests." Will heard his sister, his best friend, and his girlfriend inhale sharply next to him. He quickly glanced at them and saw the concerned expressions on their faces.

"What did they find?" asked Will. Joyce held his hands in hers and stared at the floor as though trying to find the words. Tears were falling down her cheeks.

"They found some scarring on your heart, kid," said Hopper. "Apparently opening those portals and everything else you've been through caused a lot of stress. They're getting you on the transplant list. Doctor Owens said it's not an emergency yet, but the sooner we get this taken care of, the better."

"Oh," said Will. He glanced around at the other people in the room. They were visibly upset. He squeezed his mother's hands and walked

into the kitchen where he pulled some dinner plates out of the cabinets.

"Will, what are you doing?" asked Joyce.

"Setting the table. It smells like dinner's almost ready and we still have to study for Kaminski's test," said Will impassively

"Here, I-I'll help you," said Julie in a strained voice. She grabbed some salad bowls and followed Will to the dining room table.

"I'll get the silverware," Mike volunteered. Eleven followed him and grabbed some glasses out of the cabinet. Hopper and Joyce looked at each other and sighed.

During dinner, Will made several attempts to steer the conversation away from his health. I tried the homecoming float he was working on with Julie, the comics he was working on with Mike and the tricks that he and Eleven were trying to teach her dog Buttons. It was useless, they spent most of the meal in silence.

"Jonathan is usually back in his dorm room around ten," said Joyce. "Would you like to call him and let him know what's happening?"

Will shook his head.

"He'd want to know."

"I know he would," said Will. "But it's pointless to tell him now. He has a lot of class work and I could be on that list for months. It'll just cause him to worry when there's nothing he can do. I don't want to put him through that. We can tell him when it's time for the surgery."

"In the meantime," said Hopper. "You need to start taking it easy, Will."

"Taking it easy from what?" asked Will. "I'm not doing anything particularly strenuous right now. I mean Kaminski's class is rough, but I'll be a lot more stressed out if I fall behind in my school work."

"You're bikin' all over town with your friends," Hopper began.

"It's healthy exercise and good stress relief," Will countered.

"There's also the decathlon team, the homecoming committee, the drama club, AV club and every other thing you're involved in," said Hopper.

"None of those things caused my heart issue," said Will. "And I don't plan on opening any more portals."

"Will, you need to take it easy and cut back on your activities," Joyce pleaded.

"I will take it easy, Mom. But quitting my clubs won't help," said Will. "Look, I knew opening those portals was a risk, but the alternative was letting the shadow monster spread into Hawkins and possibly kill everyone and everything. Having a heart transplant is a small price to pay and I can deal with it. Can you?"

"I can deal with it," said Joyce as she reached over and squeezed Will's hand. "It's just hard seeing you have to go through a risky procedure."

"I know," said Will. "But I'm fine. I'll be okay." He looked at his watch. "C'mon guys, we'd better start studying for Kaminski's test."

Will, Mike, Eleven and Julie took their plates to the sink and headed to Will's room to study. They went over all of Nancy's cards three times, shuffling them each time before Hopper came up and insisted on giving Mike and Julie rides home.

Will sat on his bed drawing pictures for some of the stories he'd been working on with Mike. He had his headphones on as he listened to a mix tape that Jonathan had recently sent so he didn't hear Eleven knocking. She had to use her telepathy.

*"Will, I've been knocking for two minutes!"*

*"Sorry, El."*

Will got up and opened the door for his sister. "What is it?"

"Can I borrow your supercom, I want to call Mike."

"Sure." Will picked it up off of his dresser and handed it to her. Eleven wordlessly took it and headed back to her room.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Mike and Julie were both visibly upset when they arrived at their respective homes. Karen and Mrs. Mason both called Joyce when they coaxed the truth out of their children. She assured them both that her family was alright and dealing with things as best as they could.

Mike was laying down on his bed staring at an old photo of the party winning the middle school science fair. With Dustin and Lucas involved in baseball and Mike and Will working on the stories for the video games they planned to create someday as well as all four party members in relationships with girls, they were starting to drift apart. They had made a promise to each other that they would have at least one D and D campaign a month- just the four of them. They'd have another campaign with new party members like Will and Mike's friend Randy or their girlfriends, but doing something that involved just the four original party members was important to all of them.

Mike felt hot tears roll down his face as he stared at the science fair picture. He didn't know exactly why he was so upset. They'd been through much worse, but Will's heart transplant scared Mike. He has seen all of the usual signs of Will pretending to be okay about everything. He could tell that Will was trying to hide just how upset he really was.

"Mike!" El's voice came through his supercom. Will must have let Eleven borrow his. Since moving closer, the signal from Will's supercom much more easily reached Mike's and the others. It was nice because they'd work on their stories together late at night.

"El? How's Will doing." Mike knew she was calling because she was worried about Will. There was no reason to pretend otherwise.

"He's still being brave for everyone," said Eleven. "He was listening to a mixtape Jonathan gave him when I borrowed the supercom."

"He just doesn't want everyone fussing and worrying," said Mike.

"He's right, he may not even have the surgery for months, but... this still sucks,"

*"Will's having surgery?"* Dustin's voice came through the speaker.

*"Shut up, Dustin!"* Lucas hissed from his own supercom.

"Are you two freaking KIDDING me?" said Mike into his supercom. "What the hell?"

"Hey, we were just trying to find out what was going on with Will and figured you weren't going to tell us if we asked," said Dustin.

"This wasn't my secret to tell and how did you even know something was going on?"

"We saw Hopper giving you a lift home and you didn't even wave back when we waved at you, you looked upset. And Jennifer Hayes called us and said that Julie looked upset when he dropped her off," said Lucas.

Mike buried his face in his hands and shook his head as he audibly groaned. Will wouldn't be thrilled about everyone knowing.

"Look, we know you two think you're Will's personal protectors and all, but we're his friends too," said Dustin.

"Sorry, Mike, we were just worried," said Lucas. "But Dustin has a point."

"And you always use this channel," said Dustin.

"Mike," said Eleven. "I think Will might be upset about this. I-I don't want him to be upset. It could be bad for his heart."

"I know," said Mike. "But we should probably just rip the band aid off on this one."

"Rip the band aid off?" asked Eleven.

"Mike's saying we should just tell Will the truth and get it over with," Dustin explained.

"Yeah," said Mike. "Just give me a minute to figure out how I'm going to explain this and you can take the supercom to him."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Will had decided to take off his headphones and listen to his music on the small speaker since he didn't want to have anyone knock on the door and panic when he didn't hear it. That turned out to be a good decision because his mother knocked on the doory around 10:30.

"Come in," Will called. Joyce entered and sat on the edge of Will's bed. His notebooks and sketch pads covered most of it. He was trying to make himself tired so he could fall asleep.

"Hey sweetheart, are you doing alright...all things considered?"

"Yeah I'm fine, Mom, really," said Will earnestly.

"Are you sure you don't want to call your brother?"

"I don't want him to worry."

"Jonathan would want to know, Will," said Joyce.

"I know he would, but he's already missed out on so many things by worrying about me and I don't want him to miss out on anything else."

"Will, I know that you don't want everyone to constantly be worrying about you, but we do it because we love you and you've been through so much," said Joyce as she rubbed her son's arm.

"I *have* been though a lot, Mom. And I'd rather go through a thousand surgeries than be stuck in the Upside Down, get possessed by a shadow monster, or get kidnapped by mad scientists ever again. Really, I can handle this. I'll be fine."

"I know you can handle it, Will," said Joyce as she pulled him into a hug that he didn't resist. "But you shouldn't have to."

"Will?" Eleven stood in the doorway holding Will's supercom. "Mike wants to talk to you."

"I'll leave you to this," said Joyce. "But get some sleep, both of you." She kissed each of them on their foreheads and closed the door behind her as she left. Eleven handed the supercom to Will.

"Hey Mike, it's Will, over."

"Hey Will, there's something I have to tell you, over,"

"Oh? What is it?"

"Well, El and I were talking about how we're worried about the surgery."

"It's nothing to worry about."

"It is for us! Anyway, Lucas and Dustin were eavesdropping on us because Jennifer told Dustin that Julie looked upset when Hopper dropped her off and Lucas and Dustin saw me looking upset in Hopper's truck, so..."

"So they know about the surgery," said Will.

"Yeah, they know. I just thought I would tell you right away," said Mike. Will looked up at Eleven who looked worried that he was about to have a meltdown.

"I appreciate it," said Will. He then started laughing uncontrollably.

"Will? Are you okay? What's going on?" asked Mike. Will had dropped the supercom when he started laughing and it had muffled the sound of his laughter for Mike. Eleven picked up the device.

"He's laughing, Mike," she answered. Will held out his hand and Eleven handed him the supercom.

"Dustin? Lucas?" are you two still listening?"

"Sorry, we were worried," said Dustin.

"And we knew Mike would tell us if we asked," Lucas added.

"You guys said you were hanging up!" said Mike indignantly. "So



much for 'friends don't lie.'"

"I like to think of it as bull shitting," said Dustin.

"I'm going to start using new channels," said Mike.

"Alright, guys," said Will. "I'm going to tell you what I told my Mom a few minutes ago: I'd rather have a thousand surgeries than get stuck in the Upside Down, possessed by the Mind Flayer, or get kidnapped by mad scientists ever again." There was an awkward silence. "I can handle this, really. I just don't need to whole school knowing right now."

"Understood," said Lucas. "But we are here for you."

"I know you are and I appreciate it," said Will.

"Mike, you want to get to school early and go over Nancy's cards one more time before we take Kaminski's test?"

"At least you're being yourself, Will," said Dustin.

"Sure," said Mike pointedly. "7:15?"

"Sounds like a plan," said Will. "I'll call Julie in the morning and let her know. Lucas and Dustin: feel free to join us, I know you need all the help you can get," Will added lightly.

"See you in the morning," said Mike.

"See you in the morning," said Will. "Over and out." Will shut off his radio and noticed that Eleven had a concerned look on her face. "What's wrong, El?"

Eleven started crying. "Hey! What is it?" Will stood up and hugged his sister and she hugged him back.

"It's my fault, Will. I shouldn't have made you help me listen to Dad talking to Sara. It made you sick."

"El, this has been going on for a while. It took them a long time to catch it, but they knew something was there. It wasn't you, it was

Brenner and everyone like him who uses others to try to get power. Please don't blame yourself."

"I just don't want you to die."

"I'm not going to die, El, I promise!" Will stifled a yawn.

"You're tired," said Eleven. "Go to sleep."

"I knew it! You and Mom and in this together," said Will. Eleven chuckled. "You get some sleep too. We have a big test tomorrow."

"Yeah, big test," said Eleven.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter Three

Will looked over at his alarm clock. It was only 3:30. He tried to find a different position to make himself fall asleep, but it was no use. He looked to the one side and Chester's nose was in his face.

"Do you need to go out, boy?" Will asked. Chester wagged his tail. "We may as well, I'm not going to fall asleep any time soon." Will hopped out of bed, grabbed a sweatshirt, and headed downstairs with Chester and his cat Luke at his heels. He pulled a flashlight out of one of the drawers in the kitchen, went out the back door and shined the flashlight around the yard.

Will was unaware that his step father had also been unable to sleep and was sitting quietly in the living room. "Alright, Chester, it's all clear, come on out and do your business. Stay, Luke!"

Will watches as Chester sniffed around the yard for just the right place to relieve himself. It was a nice night. Hawkins was experiencing an Indian summer. Will shut his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of the breeze as he leaned on the porch railing.

"You couldn't sleep either, huh kid?" asked Hopper, slightly startling Will. Will shrugged. "It's okay to be nervous about the surgery you know."

"This is probably more about Kaminski's stupid test," said Will. "El and I are going to school early to do some last minute studying with Mike."

"So you aren't even a little nervous about the surgery?"

"Of course, I'm a little nervous about the surgery," Will snapped. "I don't want to die, but what good does freaking out do?"

"Sorry, buddy, I shouldn't have pushed. You're probably sick of everyone asking you if you're alright. Worrying comes natural when people care that much."

"No, no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap," said Will. "If it were any of you guys, I'd probably be doing the same, but..."

"It always seems to be you going through this crap," said Hopper.

"Yeah," said Will in a barely audible voice. He leaned back on the porch rail and Hopper leaned next to him. They watched as Chest continued to sniff around the yard. Will pondered the situation for a moment, but figured that was as good a time as any to bring the subject up. He took a deep breath. "How's Sara doing?"

Hopper flinched at the question. "How do you know about that?"

"You do know who my twin sister is, right?"

"She really needs to stop trying to find people in the void all the time, she could make herself sick," said Hopper.

"El was worried about you," said Will. "She wants to help, you know. She *could* help. She's actually been through it."

"That's why she should be allowed to just be a kid and not have to worry about this stuff," said Hopper.

"Sara should be allowed to just be a kid too," Will insisted. "Seriously, talk to El, she can help Sara. She *will* help Sara. Just think about it, okay?"

"Okay, I'll think about it. Back on topic: it's good to know that you don't want to die."

"Of course I don't want to die," said Will. "Why does everyone think I have a death wish?"

"You do have a tendency to put yourself in danger," said Hopper.

"Aren't you the same guy who broke into Hawkins lab to find me and a year later go stuck in the tunnels under the town for a whole day. Do *you* have a death wish, Hopper?"

"Good point, kid," said Hopper. "I don't have a death wish either, by the way. It's just that your mother and brother overheard Mike asking

if you knew closing the gate could kill you and you telling him that you had thought it was possible."

Will groaned and rested his forehead on the railing. "That was two years ago. And yes, I thought it was a possibility, but the alternative was letting the Mind Flayer kill everyone and everything. And before you ask about last year and opening two portals, my reasoning is the same, I didn't want everyone else to die. Mom and Jonathan could have always talked to me about it if they were so freaking concerned instead of worrying and making assumptions behind my back."

"They have tried to talk to you about things, but you have a tendency to shut down and pretend that everything's ok."

"Maybe that's because everyone always thinks I'm going to break if the tiniest thing goes wrong," said Will as he threw his arms up in frustration.

So you're saying that you'd open up more if the people who care about you didn't overreact so much?" asked Hopper.

Yeah, I would. Sometimes I just want to talk, get things out in the open and move on. Mike and El let me do that and guess what? I let them do that too. It works out pretty well."

"You're mother's well aware that you've always been a little more open with Mike than you have with everyone else."

"That's because he doesn't treat me like a helpless baby! El borrowed my supercom tonight to talk to Mike. It turns out that Lucas and Dustin were listening in and know about my surgery. Everyone thought I'd be made, but guess what Mike did? He told me what happened right away."

"That sounds like a good way of doing thing," said Hopper.

"Yeah, it is," said Will.

"So why don't we try it?"

"Try what?"

"Unload all that stuff that's on your mind, right here and now. I promise I won't overreact," said Hopper.

Will looked at him skeptically. "I'm not even sure what's even on my mind. Mom and everyone else have been trying to get me to talk since we found out and I've just been saying that I'm fine..."

"I know that your mother can be a little overprotective, but try not to be too mad at her about it."

"I'm not mad at her. After everything she's been through-ever- she's entitled to overreact a little sometimes. It is a little frustrating though. I don't want to be frustrated because she's probably the best mom on the planet, but I just am," said Will.

"Of course you are, you like your independence and it's hard for her to give that to you. You have gone through a lot of difficult times in your life though. You could barely leave the house after what those kids did to you at that party last year."

"I know," said Will the memories of those months when he couldn't make it through the day without breaking down at least one flooded into his mind. He tried to push them out. "And I don't ever want to feel like that again. I don't want to be afraid to go out and do things. I want to enjoy life. I know I'm supposed to take it easy in my condition and all, but I don't want to just stop doing everything that makes me happy just because I'm a little sick."

"A *little* sick?"

"I know, it's potentially really serious, but they found it early and it's treatable. I shouldn't have to stop riding my bike or being in clubs."

"No, kid, you shouldn't have to stop everything, but you do need to slow down a bit," said Hopper.

Will looked like he was about to retort, but seemed to decide against it. He looked away and stared at Chester who had started chasing his own tail. Hopper searched his mind for something to say or a way to break the awkward silence.

"You know, Will," said Hopper as he put his hand on Will's shoulder

as Will continued to stare at his dog. "Everything you've been through in the past couple of years...you've really shown who you are as a person."

Will remained silent for a few seconds before responding. "Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"Someone with quite a bite of courage."

"Yeah, so much courage that I've spent most of my life relying on my brother and my friends to protect me. Oh, and since my sister came back into our lives, I've probably relied on her a lot more than she needs after everything she's been through."

Hopper tightened his grip on Will's shoulder and spun his step son around to face him. He clamped his other hand down on Will's other shoulder. Will looked slightly taken aback for a moment then started at the floor of the porch nervously. Hopper felt a little guilty as he certainly hadn't meant to scare the boy, but he needed to get through to Will.

"Look at me, Will." Will looked up and met Hopper gaze. "I've got something import to say and I need you to listen!"

Will nodded silently. His eyes started to drop, but he thought better of it and looked back at his step-father. Will lifted both of his hands to push Hopper's hands off of his shoulder and the older man loosened his grip, but didn't completely let go. "Alright, I'm listening," said Will.

"Good," said Hopper. "You seem to think that your this huge burden on the people who care about you. They'd all go to hell and back to protect you."

"Yeah," said Will in a barely audible voice that was tinged with guilt. Hopper gave a frustrated sigh.

"The thing is, you'd do the same for them. You've *done* the same for them. You went with Lonnie last year to keep your mother from getting arrested."

"I should have known that was a trap," said Will glumly.

"We all should have. I should have been there to stop those bastards."

"You were sick."

"And you were- you still are- a kid," said Hopper. He lifted one of his hands off of one of Will's shoulders and started counting on his fingers. "You saved my life when I got stuck in the tunnels two years ago. You stood up to Troy when he played that practical joke on your friend Randy."

"Yeah, and Mike had to come to my rescue yet again when I got punched in the face and we both ended up in the hospital!"

"Hey, kid, I'm working on making a point here," said Hopper. "I'm going to need to stop interrupting me, alright?"

"Fine," said Will. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just let me finish," said Hopper. Will decided to just give a quick nod.

"We've already discussed you telling us to close the gate to stop that shadow monster, despite knowing it could possibly kill you and doing that trick with the portals last year, despite the fact that it was dangerous for you.

"Shoot, I remember the day we first met, you were trying to get help for your brother when he was sick and Lonnie was just sitting on his sorry ass watching a baseball game."

Will gave a slight scowl at the memory of Jonathan almost dying because their father just thought that Will was overreacting. It had soured him on baseball until Dustin and Lucas started playing.

"And you've done little things everyday that means a lot to people. Like giving Julie your toy truck when you couldn't afford to get another one. Not many kids the age you were when you did that would be so generous.

"The point, Will, is that you've give as much, if not more than you've gotten from others. Real friendship is a two way street. Sometimes you do things for your friends sometimes they do things for you. We



all worry about you when bad things happen, but don't think for a second that you're a burden to any of us."

Will looked at Hopper carefully for a few seconds to make sure he was finished talking. "Ok, Hopper. I hear what you're saying, I understand."

"Good," said Hopper. "And I have to say something else: I know that Lonnie spent a lot of years putting you and your friends down because you didn't fit into his idea of what men should be; but when I was serving in Nam, I would have taken you and your friends in my platoon over Lonnie and guys like him any day. You know why?"

Will shrugged.

"Because you put others before yourself. This world would be a lot better off if there were more people like you and fewer people like your father."

"Lonnie's not my father!," said Will hotly. "*You* are."

Hopper was momentarily stunned. He released his grip on Will. Sure, he has married Joyce and legally adopted Will. Sure, Will's long lost twin had been calling Hopper 'Dad' for quite some time, but he couldn't recall Will actually saying it. Hopper was taken aback, but in a good way.

"I-well-thanks, kid. I feel the same way." Hopper found himself smiling warmly at that tiny thing. Will stuffed his hands into the pockets of the and gave his own awkward smile. "I wasn't sure. You've never actually called me dad, so..."

"It doesn't mean I haven't thought it. I don't know, I was just used to calling you Hopper. Habit, I guess. Do you want me to call you 'dad'?"

"I don't want you to force it. It's just a word. Actions are more important than words."

Will nodded in agreement. "Yeah, they are," he exhaled slowly. Tears pricked his eyes and he hastily wiped them away.

"What is it, Will?" Will shrugged and shook his head. "C'mon, kid, get

it out."

"The truth is, I'm terrified of the surgery. Being unconscious for several hours while they cut me open freaks me out. It shouldn't, but it does. Oh, god, it really does." Will clenched his fist and held it near his mouth. It trembled violently as tears started pouring down his face. Hopper reached out and pulled Will into a tight hug. Will tensed up at first. It was the first time Hopper had ever hugged him. Sure, there had been reassuring shoulder squeezes and the occasional hair ruffling, but never a hug. Will let himself relax into it after a few seconds. Hopper guided Will over the the bench and they sat down. Will wiped his face with both his hands as Hopper put his arm around Will's shoulders.

"I really wish that I could snap my fingers and make this all go away, or that I could guarantee that nothing will go wrong with the surgery. I really do, kid."

"I know," said Will.

"Here's what we're going to do though. You can keep doing everything you've been doing, but you're going to pay close attention to your health, understand?"

"Yes," said Will.

"If you feel winded or dizzy, you take it easy. You can ride your bike around with your friends, go to work, make those homecoming decorations, be on the decathlon team, all that. But if you ever need to rest, you take the time to rest. Got it?"

"Yes, I got it," said Will as he nodded.

"And if something's bothering you, promise me you'll talk to someone, even if it isn't me or your mom. Mike, El, Julie and any of your other friends are all good options. They'll want to help you, just like you'd want to help any of them if the situation was reversed."

"Alright, I promise."

"Let's just take this one day at a time. First thing's first. You gotta ace that chemistry test in the morning, so get some sleep."

Will let out a long yawn. "I think I can manage that now." He whistled to Chester who eagerly ran up to the porch. They headed inside and barely managed to keep Luke the cat from slipping outside as they was both exhausted. Will scooped up the cat and walked up to his room.

"Sleep tight, kid," said Hopper as he was about to enter the master bedroom.

"You too," Will answered. He went into his room and set Luke down. Chest rested on the doggie bed as Will threw himself onto his own bed. He was asleep in a matter of moments.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

AN: I actually originally intended for this to be a one shot and this scene to be almost the entire story, but the idea of Hopper finding out that Sara is alive is very complicated and there's not enough of it in my brain to make it it's own story, so I'm combining it with this one.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Chapter Four

All things considered, it was a relatively normal morning in the Byers-Hopper household. Eleven and Will had breakfast with their parents and fed their pets. Joyce was anxious about letting Will ride his bike to school in his condition. She was also anxious about letting Eleven ride to school as she had the potential for a similar condition, but Hopper convinced her that it would be ok.

"Remember what we talked about, kid," Hopper said to Will as he and Eleven took off to meet Mike and Julie. "If you feel sick at all, give me a call and I'll come and pick you up. Don't push yourself too hard."

"I remember," said Will. "And thanks... for everything."

"You're welcome," said Hopper as he patted Will's shoulder.

Joyce joined Hopper on the front porch as she watched her children ride their bikes down the street. "He'll be ok, Joyce."

"I know," said Joyce. "But old habits die hard and I can't stop worrying about him."

"We'll know more when we take him to Bloomington in a couple days. It'll all work out, I promise."

"I just want this to be over," said Joyce.

"Me too," said Hopper.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The morning study session helped the party members get through their chemistry test. Several of their classmates seemed extremely nervous during the test. Dave Carter even got up a vomited in a trash can in the back of the room.

Will and Julie were grateful that they had art after chemistry. It was

a good way to unwind.

"It's a nice day," said Julie as they headed toward their lockers after class. "How about we have lunch outside? Just the two of us?"

"Sounds good," said Will with a smile. *El, Julie and I are having lunch outside. Can you tell the others not to freak out when I don't show up in the cafeteria?*

*I can tell them,* Eleven replied. Having a telepathic link to his sister really came in handy.

Will and Julie picked a spot next to a large oak tree in the courtyard. It was far enough away that they could have a private conversation. Will knew that Julie was upset and trying to hide it. When they finished their sandwiches, Julie patted her leg. "Here, lay down for a minute," she ordered.

"Huh?" asked Will.

"I'm trying to find something good in a crappy situation," said Julie. "And resting for a few minutes will be good for you."

"Well, for the sake of my health, I'll do it," said Will. He leaned forward and kissed Julie before resting his head on her leg. Julie's right hand caressed Will's head as her left hand interlaced her fingers with his. Will closed his eyes and relaxed.

"Who knows," said Julie. "Mom was really worried about you. Maybe she'll let us be alone once in a while when you're over. I swear my parents still think I'm like Tina and Brian. At least they know that you're nothing like any of the people they dated."

"I'm not as innocent as I seem," Will teased. "And you using my condition to get some alone time with me sounds a little like exploitation."

"Do I have your permission to do it?" asked Julie in a mock-serious tone.

"Of course you do," said Will. "In fact, I insist on it."

"Then it's ethical exploitation," said Julie. She and Will both burst out laughing.

"You and the fairy are putting on quite the show, Julie," said Stacy as she and her group approached the couple. "You're not fooling anyone though."

"Go away, Stacy," said Julie through gritted teeth as Will sat up. "I'm not in the mood for your shit today."

"Do you think you can tell me what to do, loser?" asked Stacy. "I think Julie needs a lesson in manners." Two of Stacy's friends grabbed Will and Julie's bags and dumped the contents-mostly art supplies on the ground.

"What the hell is your problem, bitch?" Julie demanded as she jumped to her feet. "What did we ever do to you?" Will began picking up the art supplies and putting them back into the bags. Stacy raised her hand to draw on Julie's face with her pen, but it suddenly exploded and ink leaked all over her arm. Stacy shrieked and ran into the main building followed by her friends.

Julie wiped tears from her face as she helped Will finish putting the supplies in their bags.

Will saw Mike running from the building toward a tree where Eleven was standing. The reason for Stacy's leaky pen suddenly became very clear to him.

"C'mon," he said to Julie as he took her hand after they finished picking up their things. They walked toward the spot where Eleven stood and reached her before Mike. "Why did you do that, El?"

"They were being mean to you," said Eleven. "Stacy is always mean to my friends, she deserved it."

"She's been a jerk since the first grade," said Julie. "But we can deal with it, you don't have to worry."

"She made you cry and she keeps lying about Will," said Eleven as Mike reached the tree.

"There you are, El," said Mike as he caught his breath. "Why did you run off like that?"

"I saw Stacy being mean to Will and Julie again, came to teach her a lesson," said Eleven.

"Wait, were you in my head again?" asked Will.

"Was just doing a quick check," said Eleven. "Didn't listen to your private conversation."

"That's good," said Will. He quickly checked around to make sure no one was listening. "It's great that you care and all, but you can't use your powers for things like this."

"You sound like Dad," said Eleven.

"He's right," said Will. "I don't want you to risk exposing yourself and ending up in some weird prison just because someone's being a jerk to me or one of your other friends."

"What happened?" asked Mike.

"Stacy was being her usual charming self and El made her pen explode," said Julie.

"Oh," said Mike. "Will's right. I mean, what you did sounds pretty cool and all-

"Mike," Will hissed. "Could you not encourage my sister?"

"Right, sorry," said Mike. "But there are all kinds of bad people still out there. Promise you won't go using your powers like that."

Eleven stubbornly folded her arms over her chest and leaned against the tree.

"I do have a serious heart condition, El," said Will. "If I'm worried about you, it can only make things worse."

"You're playing that card, Will?" asked Mike.

"Yep!"

"Fine, I promise," said Eleven. She wanted to teach anyone who would hurt her brother, her boyfriend or any of her other friends a lesson, but Will was right.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Karen Wheeler and Anne Mason took Joyce out the lunch. It was a decision they'd made when their children had come home upset over the news of Will's condition the night before. Karen talked Ted into giving Joyce a two hour lunch break.

"How's Will holding up?" asked Karen.

"He's trying to be strong," said Joyce. "He doesn't want Jonathan to know because he's afraid it'll distract him from his studies."

"Mike mentioned that and asked us not to tell Nancy," said Karen. "He was really upset when he got home last night."

"So was Julie," said Anne. "She wants to do anything she can to help, and so do I. Will is such a great kid."

"I think that having Mike, Julie and all of Will's other friends around will help a lot," said Joyce. "I just want this to be over and I want Will to have a nice life."

"That's going to happen," said Karen as she squeezed Joyce's hand. "It'll take time, but I believe it will happen for him."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Eleven had a quiet dinner with her parents that evening. She slipped scraps of food to the dogs and cats when (she believed) Joyce and Hopper weren't looking. Will was at work with Mike.

"I have something to tell both of you," Eleven said to Joyce and Hopper.

"What is it, sweetheart?" asked Joyce.



"We can see you feeding those pets of yours," said Hopper with a small smile.

"Oh," said Eleven as she handed a piece of tuna to Leia under the table. "That's not it though." She took a deep breath. "I-I used my powers at school today."

Joyce nearly spilled her glass of milk. "What?" she asked in a concerned voice. "Did anyone see you?" Eleven shook her head. "How exactly did you use your powers?"

"Stacy and her friends were being mean to Will and Julie again, so I made her pen leak," said Eleven. "But Will and Mike made me promise I wouldn't do it anymore. Mike said that Will was playing that card when Will said it could make his condition worse if he had to worry about the bad people finding me."

Hopper buried his face in his hands and shook his head. Eleven felt terrible seeing that. "How many times have we talked about this, kid?" he asked.

"Lots of times," said Eleven. "I'm sorry I broke the don't be stupid rule. I'm just tired of seeing people being mean to Will, Mike and everyone else."

"I know it's hard watching people you care about being treated poorly," said Joyce. "But sometimes we have to do the hardest thing and be the bigger person. You can always stand up to people like Stacy without using your powers."

"Will and Mike stood up to Troy without powers and he hurt them," said Eleven.

"I know," said Joyce. She felt sick to her stomach at the memory. "Stacy isn't a psycho like Troy and it's important to never sink to a bully's level."

"We know it's hard sometimes, El, and we know you want to protect your friends. Just remember, getting back at mean people by risking exposure isn't worth it. The best way to get back at them is to make a good life for yourself, move on and forget them. You and your friends

have a bright future. Don't go risking that for some momentary satisfaction of using your powers on some jerk. Understand?" asked Hopper.

"Yes," said Eleven.

"Good. We appreciate you being honest with us about it," said Hopper. "Speaking of using your powers, there's something I'd like to talk to both of you about."

"Is anything wrong?" asked Joyce.

"No, something might be right, actually."

"What is it, Dad?" asked Eleven.

"Will and I had a good talk last night. He told me that you know about Sarah."

"I'm sorry," said Eleven. "I was worried about you, and I made Will help me look. It probably made him sick."

"It's ok, kid," said Hopper. "And you didn't make your brother sick. I'm willing to bet that being trapped in the Upside Down for a week then being possessed by the shadow monster did a lot more to cause his condition more than using those powers of his. His chest what always the first place he felt pain whenever they burned those vines. Anyway, Will said that you might be willing to help Sara get better. You've been through the same thing, and it'll be good for her to talk to someone who can really understand."

"Will's right, Dad. I want to help," said Eleven. Joyce smiled proudly and gave her hand a squeeze.

"Great," said Hopper. "Will has an appointment on Friday. It's in the same hospital where Sarah is staying. Do you feel up to talking to her while your brother is with the doctors?"

"I can do that," said Eleven.

"I know you can. I do have to warn you, it won't be easy. She's been through a lot and she's angry at the world right now."

"I know," said Eleven. "I saw.... Maybe Kali and Jane can help too."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Eleven glanced at Will as they were about to enter the large hospital. They'd been there every month for their check ups and it wasn't Hawkins lab, but he still looked anxious. Dr. Owens had decided to increase Will's visits from monthly to bi-weekly when Mr. Clarke discovered his heart condition.

"I can stay with you, Will," Eleven offered. Will shook his head.

"I'll be fine. I don't like these check ups, but I can deal with them. Besides, you're here to help Sara."

"Remember, El, if Sara lashes out, don't take it personal," said Hopper.

"I know," said Eleven. "She's angry at the situation."

"You'll help her, El, I know it," said Will earnestly.

"We'll see you two after the check up," said Joyce to Hopper and Eleven. She gave them both a quick hug.

Hopper put his hand on Will's shoulder. "I want you to tell them about any time you've felt any sort of pain even if it seems insignificant. Your old science teacher only thought to look for the tissue damage because you told them about your shortness of breath last month. That just may have saved your life, Will."

"Ok," said Will.

Joyce put her arm around her youngest child and led him toward the cardiac ward. He was quiet and she didn't push him to talk. Part of Will wished that Jonathan was there with him. He wanted to call his brother and ask him to come home. Another part still didn't want his older brother to know because Jonathan would forget about everything he'd been working his whole life to achieve if he thought that Will needed him.

"You ready for this, kid?" Hopper asked Eleven as she watched her

mother and brother disappear down the corridor. She actually felt terrified of meeting Sara. She wanted Will to be there with her, but she wanted him to get better even more. She also wished that Mike could have come to Bloomington with them.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Will seemed to shut down as they arrived at the exam room. Joyce noticed that he had the same look on his face that he had before his appointments at Hawkins Lab after his "episodes." Although he was mostly doing better, Will still suffered from PTSD and occasional depression. Once in a while, he still had nightmares. Eleven occasionally had nightmares about her time as a test subject. When the nightmares happened, they had each other. They also had each other when they went in for their monthly exams. It made things just a little better.

That day, the twins were separated. Joyce knew that her children were scared of what they had to do that day and they weren't facing their respective situations together. They were both trying to put on brave faces. Joyce was also aware that Will and Eleven lived in the continual fear that they would somehow end up trapped in the horrific situations of their traumatic experiences. She understood that fear as she still lived in the constant fear of losing one or both of them. Joyce understood why Will didn't want to give up any of his hobbies because he was sick. Hanging out with his friends and being involved in his extra-curricular activities let him know that he was safe and gave him happy moments. Going to labs for exams reminded him of the moments he wanted to forget.

A nurse handed Will a hospital gown to change into. He looked at the garment with loathing, but quietly walked into the changing room.

"This shouldn't take long," Dr. Owens told Joyce. "These appointments are just a precaution. We want to keep checking Eleven and the others as well, just to be safe."

"Hopper thinks that being stuck in the Upside Down for so long and being possessed by the shadow monster caused this. The pain always started in his chest whenever someone burned those vines," said Joyce. "El should be safe, right?"

"The doctors seem to agree with Hopper, but we don't want to take any chances. She was in that lab for almost 13 years and Brenner put her through a lot."

"But she seems perfectly healthy," said Joyce desperately. "She has to be ok, she just has to."

"She probably is perfectly healthy. The thing is, we've tracked down several of the test subjects and some of them died as a result of the experiments. We don't want any more of them to die, especially the children who didn't volunteer."

"Some of the children died?" asked Joyce.

"Yes," said Dr. Owens. "I know that your kids aren't exactly fond of coming here, but we don't want to miss anything."

Joyce looked over at Will, who was stepping on a scale as a nurse wrote down the the information on a chart. She followed her son to the exam chair and sat in the seat next to him. Will closed his eyes as the assistants placed the heart monitor wires on his chest.

"Are you alright, baby?" asked Joy as she reached over and messaged Will's shoulder.

"I'm fine, Mom," said Will without opening his eyes.

"*Will*, what is it?"

Will opened his eyes and looked at his mother. "It's just... this is bringing...*everything* back so vividly. I'm just trying to focus on happy memories, that's all."

Joyce took Will's left hand in both of hers. "I'm sorry. I wish you didn't have to go through this. I wish none of this had ever happened."

"It's okay, Mom," said Will. "I do have a lot more happy memories than crappy ones, you know. You helped give me a lot of them."

"You have so many more happy memories to come, I promise," said Joyce.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Hopper waited outside in the hallway after Sara asked asked to speak to Eleven alone. He had fears they the two girls who meant the world to him would somehow feel a competition with one another. Diane had thought that Hopper was replacing Sara with Eleven. Losing Sara had certainly motivated Hopper to protect and take care of Eleven, but he'd genuinely grown to love her as his daughter.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

"They took you when you were born?" asked Sara.

"Yes," said Eleven. "My father-Lonnie- sold me to Papa- Dr. Brenner."

Sara leaned on the table an began tracing vague shapes with her finger. "And your mother never tried to find you?"

"She didn't know about me," said Eleven. "Not until last year."

"How could your mother not know about you?" asked Sara incredulously. "She was pregnant with you for nine months!"

"Seven months. We came early-me and my brother."

"Brother?"

"Yes, my brother Will. My mom didn't know she was having twins and they hurt her so she wouldn't remember having me. Will said she always knew something had happened and Lonnie told her she was crazy."

Sara's face softened a bit. "Your own father *sold* you?"

"Yes," said Eleven. "He sold my brother too-last year when Papa wanted to use Will."

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't know. Why did Brenner want to use your brother?"

"My brother can open portals and Brenner wanted him to open the gate to the Upside Down again."

"The Upside Down?"

Eleven tried to remember how Mike had explained the Upside Down to everyone. "It's like an evil echo of our world, but everything is dead or toxic."

Sara froze. Her eyes widened and her hands began to tremble.

"Sara? Are you okay?" asked Eleven.

Sara swallowed. "Is everything dark in the Upside Down? Are there particles floating everywhere? Are there storms that are like monsters?"

"Yes," said Eleven. "A shadow monster from the Upside Down possessed my brother two years ago and used him to try to spy on us and get into our world. Have you seen the Upside Down?"

Sara nodded. "I used to have visions of it. They only lasted a few seconds, but I was terrified. One day I was in a park with my parents and everything went dark. There were storms all around me. My parents were gone, but then I heard my father telling me to breathe and everything was normal again. They took me to a doctor when I had more episodes and couldn't breathe. The doctors convinced us all that I was sick and dying- and I just woke up in a lab one day... a prisoner. I never had cancer."

"Your mom and dad thought you did," said Eleven. "They thought you were gone-dead."

"They've moved on without me," said Sara angrily as she picked at her hospital bracelet. "My mom has Elizabeth and my dad has you."

"Our dad was always sad because he thought you were dead. He's happy that you're alive and he wants you to have a happy life," said Eleven. "I want to help."

"What about your brother? Is he still alive?"

"Yes," said Eleven. "Our Dad adopted him when he married my mom so Lonnie can't hurt him anymore."

"My dad's wife is your mother? Your *birth* mother?"

Eleven nodded. Hopper had told her that Sara didn't know much about everything in their lives, but she was taken aback by just how little Sara knew. They had only just rescued her from the lab she was in.

"So where's your brother now? Why isn't he here?"

"His heart was damaged by the Upside Down and the Shadow monster," said Eleven.

"Is he going to be alright?" asked Sara.

"I hope so," said Eleven. "He's in this hospital getting a check up right now because he's going to have an operation to get a new heart."

"Can I meet him?"

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Hey, how'd the check up go?" asked Hopper as he stood up to greet Joyce and Will as they approached him in the hallway.

"It's all as good as it could be all things considered," said Will. "Where's El?"

"Sara wanted to talk to her alone," said Hopper. He looked at the door to the room where Sara and Eleven were having their conversation. Eleven suddenly burst through the door. She spotted her family.

"Will!" she called as she ran over to her brother. "Sara wants to talk to you."

"Me?"

"Yes," said Eleven breathlessly. "I told her about what happened to us. She wants to talk to you."

Hopper and Joyce exchanged a nervous glance.



"You don't have to see her if you're not up to it, Will," said Hopper.

"Why wouldn't I be up to it?" asked Will.

"You know why," said Hopper.

"Sweetie, Sara's been through a lot. She lashes out sometimes," said Joyce.

"I can relate," said Will as he shrugged. "Let's go, El."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Is this your brother?" asked Sara.

"Yes," said Eleven. "This is Will."

"Um, hi Sara," said Will as he held out his hand awkwardly. He noticed the haunted look in Sara's eyes. She gave him an appraising look, then shook his hand. She took a seat at the table and Eleven and Will followed.

Sara began tracing indistinct shapes on the table again. Will glanced at Eleven and she shrugged.

"Your sister told me about the shadow monster," said Sara. "That must have been rough."

"It was," said Will. "But it's over now." He pulled a collectors coin out of his pocket that Julie had given him as a good luck charm. He twirled it over his fingers. "It's over," he repeated to himself. Eleven squeezed his shoulder.

"I saw it too," said Sara. Will gave her a quizzed look. "Not the shadow monster, but the Upside Down, the storm."

"You saw that?" asked Will.

"Yes, when I was visiting Hawkins with my parents. We were in a park and I saw it. My dad was holding me and tickling me. Mom and Dad suddenly vanished. Everything was dark, dead and cold. I just looked around for my parents and there was a storm. Then I heard

my dad telling me to breathe.... Then they-whomever they are-made everyone think I was sick and took me."

"Why did they take you?" asked Will. "If you don't mind me asking...What did they make you do?"

Sara looked carefully from Will to Eleven. "Well seeing as both of you were used by them too, I don't mind *you* asking."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," said Will.

"Your sister told me a few things about the both of you, I guess it's only fair that you know about me," said Sara as she continued to trace vague shapes on the table. "I'm a psychic."

"A psychic?" asked Eleven.

"It usually happens when I touch something. People give off electric pulses when they're thinking really hard about something. Sometimes I can read minds. The doctors that the MKUltra people sold me to would loan me out to corporations for a little spying on the competition. They taught me how to act like a perfect little lady at fancy parties and everything."

"People give off electric pulses when they're thinking?" asked Will. "And those pulses transfer into objects?"

"It's hard to explain. I don't completely understand it," said Sara. "But metal is a good conductor. I could show you with that coin you've got there."

Will, who had been rolling the coin over his fingers, stopped it between his index and middle finger then held it out to Sara. She took it and closed her eyes to concentrate.

"A girl with dark hair gave this to you. Looks like she's your girlfriend. You hate coming here for check ups because it reminds you of-" Sara suddenly dropped the coin and stared at Will. He reached over, picked up the coin, and put it back in his pocket.

"Yeah," he said sourly. "It reminds me of things I wished never happened. I guess I won't be forgetting about those things anytime

soon." Will tapped his chest.

"I sorry that happened to you. To both of you," said Sara as tear pricked her eyes.

"Well, we're sorry about everything that happened to you too," said Will.

"We can help you Sara. We understand. Your dad-*Our* dad- wants you to have a happy life," said Eleven. Sara made a skeptical grunt.

"Did he ever even tell you anything about me?" she asked.

"Not a lot," said Eleven. "He said you liked space."

"He couldn't have missed me that much, then," said Sara.

"He didn't talk about you because it was painful for him," said Will. "He absolutely missed you, and he's happy that you're alive. He's just worried about you after everything that happened."

"He's probably worried that I'll never be normal," said Sara. "I don't think I ever will."

"So what?" said Will. "Our older brother always says that normal is boring, and he's right!"

"You have an older brother?" asked Sara. "Any other siblings?"

"Yes," said Eleven. "We have a sister now."

Sara rolled her eyes. "You just met me."

"That's not your fault," said Eleven. "Your dad is our dad in every way that matters, so that makes you our sister whether you like it or not and we're going to help you get better and have a happy life."

Sara gave a small laugh that Will and Eleven took as a positive sign. "We'll see about that. Just do me a favor."

"What do you want us to do?" asked Eleven.

"Don't tell anyone what we talked about today...Not even my-*our*-dad.

I'm not ready for them to know yet."

"We'll keep everything between us," said Will. "But he'll understand when you're ready to talk to him."

## 5. Chapter 5

### Chapter 5

"Will. wake up," said Eleven as she gently shook his arm. Will groggily opened his eyes and looked around. Hopper was pulling into the driveway at their home.

"Sorry, didn't mean to fall asleep," said Will.

"That's alright, baby," said Joyce as she reached back and patted Will's hand. "I think I'll talk to Dr. Owens about changing your dosage on that medicine he put you on. How are you feeling?"

"I'm alright," said Will. Hopper turned off the engine.

"Listen you two," he said pointing at Will and Eleven. "I want to thank you for talking to Sara. Whatever you said, I can see a difference in her."

"We're sorry we can't tell you when we talked about," said Eleven. "We promised."

"Don't worry about that, kid," said Hopper. "She seems to be opening up to you and trusting you. I want her to have someone she can trust, even if it isn't me. Hopefully, you can help her enough that she can get out of there."

"Would she live with us?" asked Eleven.

"I'd like that, but she'll probably choose to live with her mother. She knows Indianapolis, not Hawkins. She'd probably visit though."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Will sat on his bed working on the outline for an English paper that was due at the end of the semester when Eleven knocked her unique knock on his door.

"Come in, El," Will called. Eleven entered followed by her dog Buttons and her cat Leia. Luke, who was curled up next to Will and

flicking his tail contently gave them a quick glance and began licking his paw while Chester sat in his doggy bed and wagged his tail to greet Eleven and her pets.

"The mail came," said Eleven. "Jonathan sent a package from New York." She held out a small wrapped item for Will. He opened it up. It was a new mixtape with a note that read: *Thought you might like these, see you soon.*

"He made me one too," said Eleven. "Want to put one on while we're waiting for Mike and Julie to come over?"

"Sure," said Will. Eleven popped in his tape and U2's *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For* started playing.

"Why won't you tell Jonathan that you're sick?" asked Eleven.

"You know why," said Will. "He's spent too much time worrying about me and he's worked too hard to get to NYU to be distracted by something he can't do anything about."

"You spend a lot of time worrying about him too," said Eleven. "Why is that different?"

Will sighed and shut his notebook. "Jonathan had a job when he was our, you know. He just had to work a lot more hours because Lonnie wasn't paying child support and Jonathan had to help Mom make ends meet. I get to keep all the money from my job and I get to be involved with school activities. There's also the fact that I met Mike on the first day of Kindergarten. Jonathan had a couple kids he got along with, but he never had a Mike...or a Lucas or Dustin."

"That's not your fault," said Eleven,

"I know it isn't," said Will. "But I'm still going to let him focus on his own dreams for once, and again, there really isn't anything he can do about it anyway."

"You had a hard childhood too, and Jonathan never got trapped in the Upside Down or possessed by the Mind Flayer," said Eleven.

"Like I said, I still had Mike, Lucas and Dustin all those years. And

while we're comparing, you were trapped in a lab for over a decade. I'd say out of the three of us, I had it the easiest, heart condition or not."

"Do you really think that?" asked Eleven.

"I really do," said Will.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The party spent most of the homecoming game (a week after the first visit with Sara) looking at Sci-fi magazines. They cheered when Will and Julie's design won the float contest for the second year in a row. Will muttered that Western was a stupid theme, but it made for a decent creative challenge. They also paid attention as the marching band played at the beginning and at half time due to the fact that Dustin's girlfriend Cathy played the trumpet. "I do love a woman in uniform," Dustin remarked. "And she can multitask as well. Marching and playing at the same time takes talent."

The party members, especially Will and Mike, had very little interest in football. They had grown to like baseball due to the fact that Dustin and Lucas were on the team, but football wasn't for them. It seemed to be more for the jocks and cheerleaders than the honors students.

It was Eleven's first time fully experiencing homecoming. She'd gone to the dance with Mike the year before, but had to worry about keeping a low profile. She was a student at Hawkins High school Sophomore year, so her presence didn't raise any questions and she had to option to relax.

She couldn't relax, however. As Max and Jennifer Hayes chatted with her in order to drown out the cheerleaders (the squad included Stacy and a members of her click who frequently went out of their way to torment Eleven and her friends), Eleven's mind was on Sara and Will.

Eleven glanced over at Will, who was sitting with Julie and drawing on his sketch pad. Every few minutes, he'd hand the sketch pad to Julie and she'd draw something. Eleven couldn't see what they were working on, but figured it was a story. Mike was engaged in some

sort of card game with Lucas, Dustin, Randy, Dave, and Tim. Eleven had to giggle at the intense expressions on their faces. Max and Jennifer followed her gaze and began to giggle as well. As Eleven glanced around the bleachers, she couldn't help but notice that the crowd was light for such a big event.

Doctor Owens had agreed to change Will's weekly check ups to Saturdays, so he wouldn't miss so much school. Eleven smiled fondly as she thought of her brother's obsessive compulsive behavior when it came to his academic work. It had helped her out at great deal when it came to catching up on her school work. Perhaps, she could use what she had learned from Will and help Sara to catch up. Sara was exceptionally bright and curious. She had also been taught a lot of things by the corporation that held her captive, so she probably wouldn't need as much

Help as Eleven had needed.

The next day at their visit, Sara seemed to take particular interest in homecoming. It was one of those normal teenage thing on which she was missing out.

"This dance is tonight?" asked Sara as the end of the visit approached.

"Yes," said Eleven.

"Do you think you could come back tomorrow and tell me about it."

Will almost said that it wasn't that big of a deal, but stopped himself. Homecoming was something that he had the luxury of taking for granted and not caring too much about. Helping design the float and work on the committee was something he did to keep his mind occupied and spend time with people he liked rather than something he did out of school spirit.

"I think we can manage. We'll figure something out," said Will.

"Thanks," said Sara. "And thanks for this," she held up the solar system model kit that Will and Eleven had gotten her.

"Dad told us that you liked space," said Eleven.



"H-he did?" asked Sara.

"Yeah," said Will. "He mentioned that a lot even before he knew you were still alive."

Sara opened her mouth like she was going to say something, then appeared as though she'd forgotten what she was going to say. She merely looked down at her knees and nodded.

XXXXXXXXXX

The party members no longer had older siblings with driver's licenses to give them rides to the school dances. The idea of their parents giving them rides was horrifying, so they all found upperclassmen willing to help them out. Cathy talked a fellow trumpet player into giving her and Dustin a ride. Max found a fellow skateboarding and video game loving junior girl to give her and Lucas a lift. Mike and Will's friend Randy had managed to get a senior girl named Daphne Soder as a date. She had a van and had recently broken up with her boyfriend and another senior had pestered her for a date, so she asked Randy to go to homecoming thinking that there wouldn't be pressure from a sophomore. In Randy's case, she was unknowingly correct.

Hopper knocked on Will's door as he was trying to get the knot right in his tie. "Ready to let me help you with that, kid?" Hopper asked Will.

"Yes," Will groaned.

"Don't worry, you'll learn. Hopefully, your brother will too someday."

"I'm learning," said Will as Hopper looped the tie around and pulled up the knot. "Learning that I'll get clip ons in the future."

Hopper chuckled as he took a seat at Will's desk. "Sit down, Will, I need to talk to you about something." Will nervously sat on the end of his bed. "Don't worry, kid, you're not in trouble, I just want to give you some advice to keep you out of trouble."

Will knitted his eyebrows. "Okay," he said slowly.

"I'm going to ask you an awkward and personal question," said Hopper. Will shifted uncomfortably. "You and Julie have been together for about a year now, have you... you know.. consummated your relationship?"

"What?" asked Will. "No! we're fifteen."

"Plenty of kids your age are active these days, hell, when I was your age I was lying to my mother about being on the debate team when I was really scre-"

Will covered his ears. "I really don't want to know."

Hopper's eyes twinkled and he chuckled. Will got the distinct feeling he was getting a kick out of everything. "My point is: you're at that age when your hormones are all over the place and sometimes things happen."

"I know that," said Will. "I do have self control, you know and Julie is trying really hard to prove to her parents that she isn't like her older siblings."

"Maybe," said Hopper. "But you recently found out that you have a potentially serious medical condition. That can make even nice girls trying to prove that they aren't like their siblings start to feel on the amorous side."

"Is there a reason you're deciding to talk to me about this now?" asked Will.

"I promised your mother I would," said Hopper. "She's having the same discussion with your sister at this very moment. Do you think that Wheeler kid might try anything?" Hopper asked in mock seriousness that wasn't lost on Will.

"I try not to think about that," Will answered. "But don't worry, none of us are like you."

"And just how do you know what I'm like?" asked Hopper.

"The librarian had a few things to say," said Will with a mischievous grin. If Hopper was going to have fun trying to make him

uncomfortable, he may as well have a little fun of his own.

"Of course she did," said Hopper. "I'll have to have a talk with her about what she says to my kids. Anyway, I'm sure your mother would make a wonderful grandmother, but that doesn't need to happen for a few more years. Just promise me you'll use protection."

"Fine, I promise. Are we don't with this super weird conversation?"

"I think you might be blushing, Will," said Hopper as he noticed some color in Will's face.

"I am not!" said Will

Hopper laughed. "Yeah, we're done, kid." He stood up and patted Will on the shoulder. "Have fun tonight, just not too much fun.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Hopper and Joyce waved as Will and Eleven got into Daphne's car and left to pick up Mike and Julie.

"How did the talk go?" asked Joyce.

"A little awkward, but I think he listened," said Hopper. "How did it go with El?"

"She told me she learned about it at school. Apparently sex ed is only slightly better than it was for us."

"At least they kids are smarter than we were," said Hopper.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The dance wasn't particularly crowded. Apparently the flu had been going around that week.

"Holy shit, you guys," said Dustin to Mike, Will, Eleven, and Julie as they helped themselves to their fourth cups of punch. "The punch is *that* good! I think your lips match El's though, Mike."

"Shut up!" said Mike with a playful grin.

"Yeah, we're just really thirsty," said Will.

"I could use some air," said Julie to Will. "Want to take a walk."

"Sure," said Will as he tossed his empty cup into the garbage. "This dance is pretty lame."

*Will, you can't go off by yourself. What if someone tries to hurt you.*

*I'll be fine, El. If something happens, I'll let you know.*

As overprotective as she was, Eleven had come to the realization that Will could take care of himself, but his health made exerting himself risky. He didn't see anyone at the dance who might try anything with him and since Troy had been expelled and the chief police had become his step father, the bullies in the town hadn't been too keen to try anything with him.

He took Julie's hand and they headed out to the baseball field and sat on the grass.

They sat quietly for a few minutes with their hands intertwined. Julie looked like she was about to say something when a group of upperclassmen came out laughing obnoxiously and peeing on the field.

"I'll take that as a sign that we need to find somewhere else," said Will.

"I think you may have a gift for reading signs," said Julie.

They got up and quietly snuck away. The students in question never gave them any trouble personally, but Will and Julie had no desire to attract the attention of people peeing on the baseball field. A cool breeze swept over the area and Will gave a small shiver.

"Maybe we should go back inside," said Julie as she tugged on Will's hand and they started to jog. Running was out of the question given the fact that they were both wearing their formal shoes. "I have an idea."

"What's your idea?" asked Will.

"You'll see," said Julie with a grin. When they got inside the building, Julie led Will to the auditorium. She lifted a plaque off the wall and pulled off a key that was taped to it. She opened the door to the back stage where the two of them spent out painting scenery.

"How?" asked Will.

"Shannon Collins showed it to me yesterday. Apparently one person is allowed to know where that key is and she said I help her so much, she decided to tell me, just in case."

Will grinned. "I don't think you're supposed to use the key for this."

"Well, there's no specific rule that says we can't. Besides, the dance this year kind of sucks and I feel like crap, so we may as well relax here."

"Are you sick?" asked Will, feeling a little worried.

"I think I'm just tired," said Julie. "There's no point in asking the others to leave early when we can just kick back here. And if anyone stops by and asks what we're doing here, we'll just tell them we're brainstorming."

"Sound like a plan," said Will. "Let's get to work!" He sat down on the old sofa and allowed himself to sink into the cushions. He was feeling a little tired himself, but it had been a long week. Julie curled up next to him and he put one arm around her while using his other hand to lace his fingers with hers as she rested her head on his chest to listen to his heartbeat. It was a habit that started when she learned about his condition and it was reassuring.

"This is all very innocent," said Julie. "We're just tired and we're resting."

"Of course it is," said Will. "Is something on your mind?" Julie grimaced and her eyes flicked up to meet Will's.

"Did your parents have *the talk* with you by any chance?"

"Hopper did and apparently Mom talked to El. How'd you know?"

"It was my parents' idea. Sorry about that. They've been freaking out ever since they found out Amy Potter's pregnant. I think they were finally starting to realize I'm not like Tina or Brian. Amy on the other hand..."

Amy was a fellow Sophomore. She was an honors student who was on the student council as their class vice president. It was a shock to the community when she got pregnant. She was considered to be a 'good girl.'

"Jeff is trying to deny he's the father too," said Julie.

"What?" said Will astonished. "No way!"

"Apparently, it'll damage his reputation. She said he told her she wasn't like all the other girls. That should have been a huge warning. You'd never say that to me."

"Well, it is kind of a cliche line and I don't exactly have a ton of experience with girls other than you, do I?"

"Exactly!" said Julie. "I mean the words *all the other girls* is a dead giveaway that he's a player and when a guy tries to flatter a girl by putting down our entire gender, ugh!"

"Yeah, poor Amy. She doesn't deserve that. She made a mistake. It doesn't make her a slut."

"No, it doesn't. The people saying that are idiots."

"From that stupid abstinence talk that woman gave the girls in our class last week, you'd think that every girl was either a good girl or a slut. Between that and the excessive lectures from my parents, I'm half tempted to do it out of spite!"

"Um..." Will started.

"Not now," said Julie hastily. "It's just a random thought that came from my own annoyance."

"Oh, good!" said Will. "I mean it's not that I never want to, but.... Shit, there's no right answer for this, so I'm just going to shut up right

now."

Julie giggled. "That's alright, you're cute when you babble."

"I know," said Will. "I do it on purpose."

"Sure you do." Julie reached up and ruffled Will's hair then gave him a soft kiss that he returned. "Holy shit, I'm tired. I think you are too. What do you say we get some sleep?"

"What if everyone else decides they want to leave?" asked Will.

"El will find you when she's ready."

"Good point!"

In the Gymnasium, Mike and Eleven sat at a table in the corner having a discussion of their own while Max, Lucas, Dustin, Cathy, and all their other friends were on the dance floor. Like Will and Julie, they were both feeling tired.

"Why are all the adults telling us not to have sex all the time," Eleven asked Mike. "Mom just said to be careful, but the other adults only say 'don't do it.'"

Mike, who was taking a sip of punch as Eleven asked the question, spit it in surprise. He picked up a napkin and cleaned himself up.

"Your Mom probably explained it to you better than my dad did to me. I'm still not sure what he said. They're all just freaking out though, don't worry about it."

"Aren't you two gonna dance?" asked Lucas as he and Max approached the table.

"We danced earlier!" said Mike in protest. "We're just feeling a little tired now." Mike put his head down on the table while Eleven leaned on his shoulder and started rubbing circles on his back.

"You look tired, are you sure you're okay?" asked Max.

"We're alright," said Eleven. "Don't worry."

"Are you two ready to go?" asked Randy as he approached the table.

"You look like you're having fun," said Mike. "You're leading the dancing."

"I'm actually pretty bored," said Randy. "Not many people are joining in. I think Daphne's bored too. Why don't we find Will and Julie and get out of here."

"If you're bored, I'm all for that," said Mike as he massaged his temples.

Will and Julie were only half asleep on the sofa when Eleven's call to Will came in.

*Will, we're tired and ready to go. Are you?"*

*Yeah, El. We can meet you by the main entrance.*

Will gently tapped Julie. "El just said they're ready to leave."

Julie taped the key to the back of the plaque as they slowly trudged to the school's main entrance. Will started to feel dizzy as they headed up a half flight of stairs. He turned around and darted back to the bottom to vomit in a garbage can.

"Will!" said a startled Julie as she rubbed his back. "Are you okay?"

Will slumped onto the bottom stair with a panicked look on his face as he grabbed his chest and started breathing rapidly.

"Will, what's wrong?" asked Julie as she began stroking his hair.

"I-I think I need to go to the hospital," said Will.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*El, help!*

Eleven could feel the fear in her brother's voice. She gripped Mike's arm tightly and he looked at her questionly. He recognized the expression on her face.



*Will, what's wrong?*

*I need to go to the hospital.*

*I'll call an ambulance.*

*No! Please.*

*I be right there.*

Eleven could almost always find Will without even closing her eyes when he was scared or in peril as long as he was awake. She looked at Mike and tapped his arm four times with her index finger.

"How about we meet you guys at the front entrance in about 15 minutes?" Mike said to Daphne and Randy. "We'll go get Will and Julie."

"Do you need help finding them?" asked Randy.

"No, that's okay. We have a pretty good idea where they are. You two go ahead and enjoy the dance for a few more minutes."

Eleven tugged on Mike's hand and they headed out at a brisk walk trying not to attract attention. "What is it, El?" Mike asked after they got out to the hallway and he checked to make sure no one was listening.

"He said he needs to go to the hospital," said Eleven. "C'mon!" She started running down the hallway to the stair where she'd seen Will sitting. When they got there, Mike had to lean on the wall to catch his breath. He forgot all about being winded when he looked down and saw Will looking terrified as he clutched his chest. It reminded Mike painfully of the day the scientists at Hawkins Lab burned a vine from the upside down and Will felt the pain. His eyes were their normal color rather than the almost black shade that resulted from the Mind Flayer possession, but everything else was exactly the same.

Mike and Eleven hurried to Will's side. "Where's the pay phone?" asked Mike. "We need to call an ambulance!"

"No!," said Will in a panicked voice. "No ambulance. We can ask Daphne to take us or call my mom, but no ambulance, please!" Will

looked at Mike with a frightened determination. Mike hesitated, then nodded.

"Can you walk?" asked Mike.

"Yes!" said Will.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"Alright. Here's what's going to happen, Will," said Mike firmly. "You're going lean on me and we're going to meet Randy and Daphne at the front entrance. If you collapse, we're calling ambulance. Deal?"

Will hesitated for a moment and took note of the steely expression on Mike's face. He nodded. "Deal!"

Mike took Will's hand and help him up, it was sweaty, but so was his own hand so he barely noticed. Will barely leaned on Mike as they walked toward the entrance of the school to meet up with Daphne and Randy, Mike figured that his friend was trying to show that it wasn't as bad as everyone thought. But what if it was much worse? Will never panicked unless things were really serious.

"Oh my god, what happen?" asked Randy as he noticed that Mike was helping Will down the hallway as Julie held Will's other arm and Eleven walked behind them keeping an eye on things. No one was sure how to explain so Will decided to jump in.

"The doctors found an issue with my heart a couple weeks ago, I just haven't been telling people because I didn't want them to worry. I'm feeling a little dizzy and think I need to go to the hospital. Please don't tell anyone." Will felt bad about leaving Randy out of his secret because Randy was fairly new to the school and his friendship circle and already had a lot of reasons to feel left out of things.

"Do you want me to drive you there?" asked Daphne.

"If you could," said Will. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, wait here. I'll get my van."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Joyce and Hopper sat relaxing on the sofa having popped an old western in the VCR when the phone rang. "I'll get it," said Joyce as she kissed Hopper on the cheek. "You like this movie a lot more than I do."

She walked over and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Byers, it's Mike."

"Mike?" said Joyce. Worry was evident in her voice and it caught Hopper's attention. "What's going on. Are Will and El alright?"

"Will started feeling really sick, so we took to the hospital."

"We'll be right over," said Joyce. She hung up the phone and looked over at Hopper as she wrung her hands.

"What's going on?" he asked as he tried to keep his voice calm.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Joyce and Hopper were at the hospital within five minutes. Eleven ran up to her parents and hugged them both as Mike got to his feet. Julie had her face buried in her hands. She looked up with tears in her eyes to acknowledge her boyfriend's parents while Randy was rubbing between her shoulder blades. Daphne leaned against the wall.

"What happened?" asked Joyce.

"We were walking down the hallway about to leave and he seemed to have trouble breathing as we were climbing the steps. He got sick and threw up. Then he grabbed his chest and seemed really scared," said Julie.

"He said he needed to go to the hospital, but didn't want an ambulance," Mike added.

A doctor walked out into the room and recognized Joyce as Will had made a few trips to the hospital in the last three years.

"Good, you're here, Mrs. Byers- I'm sorry it's Mrs. Hopper now, isn't it?" Mike cringed as he remembered that he hadn't gotten used to Will's mother's new last name.

"Where's my son? How is he?"

"You can come back and see him," said the doctor. "He's fine. We ran a few extra tests- as a precaution- that we should have the results on those tomorrow morning. But it looks like he has that flu that's been going around. It's pretty nasty, so it's understandable that he thought his symptoms were connected to his heart condition. We'd like to keep him here a couple days and get him on some fluids."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. "I think I want to get you, you and you checked out and possibly admitted as well," said the doctor as he pointed to Mike, Eleven and Julie. "You're all looking a little flushed as well. You can even be roommates with your friends just like when you were both in that fight at school last year, Mr. Wheeler."

Daphne hung back as the group followed the doctor to Will's room. She told Randy she'd give him a ride home when he was ready.

Will was sitting up on his bed with his on his knees and his hands clutching his hair in frustration as his family and friends entered the room. Joyce got to him first and pulled him into a hug.

"It was the flu!" said Will. "I've been telling everyone else not to panic and here I am freaking out over the *flu!*"

"Don't beat yourself up," said the doctor. "Heart condition issued often have flu like symptoms. Looks like three of your friends are coming down with it too, you just happened to be paying attention to your symptoms. You need to keep doing that. It could end up saving your life."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

A/N: this is just a normal nasty flu and has nothing to do with the Upside Down. Think the Flu Season episode of Parks and Recreation. In my stories, Hawkins borders Pawnee. In this case, the rich snobby jerks in Eagleton took most of the flu vaccine supply in the region

that Ben Wyatt would one day represent.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter 6

*Will had been feeling very weak since the surgery. There was an infection in the incision and he wasn't reacting well to the antibiotics. Mike sat with him while everyone else was out. Will was propped up on some sofa pillows and Mike sat in a chair next to him.*

*"You don't have to let me win, Mike," said Will as he looked at his cards.*

*"I'm not," said Mike. "You're really that good!" Will rolled his eyes then had a brief coughing spell.*

*"Are you okay?" asked Mike. Will shrugged and smiled.*

*"I'm always okay!" He struggled to breathe.*

*"I'll get you some water," said Mike.*

*"You don't have to," Will started before he leaned back into the pillow. Mike reached over and felt Will's forehead.*

*"Jesus! You're burning up! I'll get you some aspirin too."*

*"Sure, okay," said Will. His head turned to the side and he closed his eyes. His breathing became shallow. Mike made a mental note to call a doctor if the aspirin didn't bring Will's fever down. He went to the kitchen and grabbed the water and aspirin.*

*"Here, this will make you feel better," said Mike as he held out the water to Will, who didn't move or react. Mike considered letting him rest, but he needed to get the fever down. "C'mon, Will, time to take your aspirin, you'll feel better." Mike gently shook Will's shoulder and he dropped. Mike froze. "Will? Will!" he wasn't breathing. Mike felt Will's neck. No pulse. No heartbeat. He felt cold. The Mind Flayer liked it cold. Will hated the cold. "NO!NO!NO!" said Mike. He ran to the phone. No dial tone. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Mike sat down and pulled Will's lifeless body to him. He was limp. Mike closed his eyes and started sobbing as he rocked Will back and forth.*

Slowly Mike's eyes opened. He wiped the tears from his face. He stared at the ceiling as it took him a few moments to remember that he was in the hospital. He looked over and saw Will sleeping in the next bed. Mike felt extremely nauseous but pushed himself to get up out of the bed. He sat down next to Will and saw that he was breathing. His breath was a little rattled, but he had the flu, that was normal. Mike looked at the clock. It was 3:30 in the morning.

Mike fought back the urge to wake his friend up. Will's rest didn't need to be interrupted just because Mike needed a little post nightmare reassurance. Mike had been experiencing occasional nightmares about Will dying ever since he'd seen a fake body pulled from the quarry. Although he repeatedly told himself that they were just nightmares, they still disturbed him. He hadn't told anyone about the nightmares, not even Eleven. He didn't want to trouble Eleven with them and he certainly didn't want to trouble Will.

If Mike had known that Will was having a nightmare of his own at that very moment (about being trapped in the Upside Down), he would have woken him up. For a few minutes, Mike's mind wandered to the conversation he'd heard a few hours earlier when Hopper had told Will that he'd kept his promise to take any symptoms seriously. Will had been feeling embarrassed about thinking his flu symptoms were heart attack symptoms and Hopper was trying to reassure him.

Mike was grateful that Hopper seemed to care so much about Will and Eleven. They deserved to have a decent father figure in their life. He'd been furious at Hopper for keeping Eleven hidden for a year, but that was the past. He was keeping her safe even if he didn't always make the best decisions. At least his heart was in the right place.

"Noooo! Please!" said Will as he put his arms over his face in defense.

"Will!" said Mike as he grabbed Will's shoulders and shook him awake. Will opened his eyes and they were wide with terror. "It's okay, Will, it was just a nightmare."

Will seemed disoriented for a few moments then noticed Mike. He breathed a sigh of relief and sat up. "I was being chased by the Mind Flayer again. It's gone though, it's gone."

"Yeah, it's gone because of you," said Mike. "You defeated it."

Will pulled his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around his legs. "I just wish I could get it out of my head."

Mike gently rubbed Will's back between his shoulder blades. "I know what you mean, I wish I could get those killer tomatoes out of my head."

Will looked at Mike with raised eyebrows. "Killer tomatoes?"

Mike told himself it was more of a joke than a lie. Will didn't need to know that Mike was having recurring nightmares about him dying. Besides, Mike remembered dreaming about killer tomatoes trying to catch him before he was sitting with a dying Will. Mike silently hoped that his tears had dried up enough that Will wouldn't notice he'd been crying. "Yeah, killer tomatoes. I think we should refuse to take any more of the medicine they gave us to help us sleep."

Will suddenly burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Mike soon joined in.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Three hours before Mike and Will woke up from their nightmares, Jonathan and Nancy got out of a cab at the Byers-Hopper home. A college friend of Jonathan had given him and Nancy some frequent flyer miles from his parents that were about to expire. They had decided to make a surprise visit to Hawkins. They flew to Indianapolis from New York, then taken a connecting flight to the Pawnee municipal airport and gotten a cab to Hawkins.

Jonathan noticed that Joyce's car wasn't in the driveway when he got out of the cab and the house was very quiet when he went inside. He knew that it was homecoming night, but Hopper and his mother would have certainly been waiting up for Will and Eleven to get home. Will had told him that Mike and Julie were planning on staying over and playing some Nintendo.

"Something's off," Jonathan said to Nancy.

"Maybe everyone's asleep," said Nancy.



"Maybe," said Jonathan doubtfully. They were greeted by Chester and Buttons who bounded down the stairs. "Hey, boy," said Jonathan as he scratched behind Chester's ears. He gestured for Nancy to follow him upstairs. They peaked in all the bedrooms, but they were all empty. "Something's wrong." It wasn't the first time he'd come home to an empty house."

"I'm sure they're fine," said Nancy as she rubbed Jonathan's arm. "Maybe Hopper got called away on a case. Why don't we call the station?"

"But where's Mom?" They headed back down stairs to look for the keys to Hopper's car. Jonathan had sold his own car for the parts before he left for college. He'd considered just giving it to Will, but it was having too many problems and breaking down too often.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Did we leave the lights on?" Joyce asked Hopper as they pulled into the driveway.

"Only the porch light," said Hopper. As they got to the porch, they noticed that the front door wasn't completely shut. Hopper pulled out his gun and took the safety off.

"I think I hear someone in the kitchen," Joyce whispered. Hopper nodded. They tiptoed in in quietly closed the door. The two dogs were standing outside of the kitchen wagging their tails. Chester would normally have growled. There was the distinct sound of a couple people opening and closing drawers.

"Alright, freeze, assholes!" said Hopper as he pointed his gun. Though a second later he was really glad that he'd never been trigger happy.

"Whoa! Wait!" said Jonathan. Hopper quickly lowered his gun and put the safety on.

"Jonathan!" said Joyce as she started crying tears of joy at the sight of her oldest child. She walked briskly up to him and pulled him into a hug. Nancy leaned against the counter for relief. "I can't even tell you how happy I am to see you!" Joyce took Jonathan's face in her hands.

"A friend gave us some frequent flyer miles and we decided to come home for a surprise visit," said Jonathan. "Surprise?"

"Sorry we weren't here when you got home. It's been a crazy night." Behind her, Hopper sat down at the table and started rubbing his eyes.

"Where are Will and El? Still at a party? Are they alright?" asked Jonathan.

"They both caught that flu that's been going around and will be in the hospital for a couple days," Joyce answered with a sigh. "What about you two? Did you get the vaccine yet?"

"Everyone staying in the dorms got it, don't worry," said Nancy.

"Good, good," said Joyce. "Well, we can take you both to the hospital to visit them in the morning-Mike's there too," she added to Nancy. "Your brother and sister will be so happy to see you though, Jonathan." she hugged him again. "I'm sorry you didn't come home to better circumstances."

Joyce and Jonathan ended up dropping Nancy off at the Wheeler house on their way to the hospital. Karen was pleasantly surprised to see her daughter. She asked Joyce to call her when the kids were hungry for breakfast: she intended to cook something for them as she knew they didn't much care for the hospital food. She gave them a basket of orange cranberry muffins and a bottle of apple juice to take the kids as a starter.

They stopped at the nurses station. "Jonathan!" said the nurse on duty as he an Joyce approached. "I didn't know you were in town!"

"It was kind of a spur of the moment thing," said Jonathan.

"How are the kids doing, Mary?" asked Joyce.

"You're step daughter is away and refusing to eat her breakfast," said Mary. "She said the eggs smell like farts." Jonathan snickered. Dustin was obviously having an influence on Eleven. Joyce shifted uncomfortably as she always did when people referred to Eleven as her step daughter. She was her own flesh and blood taken at birth. It

was a secret they all had to keep, but she hated hiding the truth.

"How about Will?" asked Joyce.

"The night shift nurse said that he and the Wheeler were playing tic tac toe a few hours ago when she checked on them. They told her the medicine was giving them weird dreams about killer tomatoes. She gave them some benadryl and they were still sound asleep when I checked on them five minutes ago."

"They were up in the middle of the night playing games because of weird dreams," said Jonathan. "Some things never change." Mike had stayed the night countless times since he and Will became friends in Kindergarten. They often had bad dreams and woke each other up. Jonathan usually heard them playing some sort of game when that happened.

"Let's check on your sister first since Will is still asleep," Joyce said to Jonathan as she took his arm and they walked toward the patient rooms. "And since they aren't letting us bend the rules on visitation hours like we've done before, maybe we can do something.. Just the two of us."

"Yeah, I'd like that," said Jonathan. They stopped by the room where Mike and Will were staying and peaked inside. Both boys were still sound asleep and looking really pale.

Eleven was in the next room with Julie. Mrs. Mason was already trying (with no success) to get them to eat their hospital provided breakfast of powdered eggs and limp bacon. Eleven was laying in her bed with her arms folded across her chest and facing away from Mrs. Mason while Julie had her blanket pulled up over her head. They were both letting out wet coughs.

Eleven looked over to see her brother enter the room. She smiled and hopped out of bed to hug him. Jonathan noted how sweaty she was and also the fact that she was burning up. He was grateful that he'd gotten a flu shot that year.

"Jonathan!" Eleven shouted happily before letting a stream of wet coughs into his shirt. "Sorry," she added as she looked up ruefully.

"Don't worry about it, El," said Jonathan. "Sounds like you need to lay down, though. C'mon." He helped her back to her bed.

"Your brother came home for a surprise visit," said Joyce.

"Sorry we're all sick," said Eleven. "I'm happy to see you."

"Maybe these girls will listen to you about eating something," said Mrs. Mason.

"This food is gross," said Eleven. "And the eggs smell like farts. They didn't even give us eggos."

"Now, Ellie," said Mrs. Mason. "There are a lot of starving children all over the world. You and Julie shouldn't be wasting your food."

"The hospital wasted it by making it gross," said Julie, who was still hiding under her blanket.

"Well, Mrs. Wheeler sent over some muffins and apple juice," said Joyce. "And we can call her when the boys wake up and she'll make you something really good."

"Eggos?" asked Eleven.

"Better than Eggos," said Joyce as she handed Eleven a muffin. She turned around and rubbed Julie's shoulder. "Here, Julie, eat one of these muffins, they're really good."

Julie peeked out from under her blanket, then took the muffin Joyce offered her.

"I think I'll go sit with Will until he wakes up," said Jonathan as he gave Eleven another half hug.

"The nurse said the Mike and Will are dead to the world," said Eleven. "We didn't know where we were at first when we woke up this morning. That medicine is weird. The boys probably won't know where they are either. You can help them Jonathan."

"I will," said Jonathan. He saw Eleven gesture for Joyce to sit beside her as he was leaving. She then rested her head on Joyce's shoulder.

Will and Mike were still sleeping when Jonathan entered the room. He quietly took a seat next to Will and picked up a magazine to read. After a few minutes, a nurse entered the room. She nodded at Jonathan and took a brief moment to check on Mike.

"I guess I'll have to wait a little longer to take their temperatures. The both need as much sleep as they can get," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. Jonathan smiled. She walked over to the other side of Will's bed and wrote some numbers on his chart. For the first time since he'd entered the room, Jonathan noticed that Will was connected to a heart monitor. Maybe it was just something to do with this particularly nasty strain of flu?

Jonathan looked over at Mike. There was no machine monitoring his heart. He couldn't remember seeing any kind of heart monitoring equipment next to Julie or Eleven either. Jonathan's nerves went into overdrive.

"Um," said Jonathan as the Nurse looked up at him. He pointed to the wires connected to Will's chest. She smiled, stepped away from the bed and gestured for Jonathan to follow.

"The doctors were just telling your mother than we might have some good news about that."

"Oh?" said Jonathan.

"Your brother may not need a full heart transplant after all. Looks like they can fix the damage with a simple minimally invasive surgery. That means he won't have to wait as long to get it all over with."

Jonathan smiled trying very hard to not look surprised. "That is good news."

"Getting the flu may have been a blessing in disguise. The doctors may not have thought to look otherwise. Your poor brother was scared to death when his friends brought him in last night. This should ease his mind a bit. Your mother was relieved, that's for sure."

"I bet she was," said Jonathan. "I know I am."

The nurse smiled and patted Jonathan on his arm. "Can you do me a favor and press that buzzer over there when these two sleepyheads wake up? I still need to get their vitals."

"No problem."

Jonathan walked back over and sat next to his sleeping brother. He folded his hands in front of his face and closed his eyes. Will was on the list for a heart transplant and his family hadn't told him. There was only one possible reason for that: Will must have insisted that they not tell Jonathan. He was probably worried that Jonathan wouldn't be able to focus on his school work. Will still seemed to think he was a burden to everyone.

As Jonathan tried to think of what to say to his brother, Will started to wake up. Jonathan decided it was best to be direct and tell Will that he knew about the condition. His brother had likely been stressing over keeping the secret.

Will's eyes flickered open. He appeared to be a little disoriented at first, then he noticed Jonathan sitting beside him.

"Jonathan, what-" Will's voice was hoarse and he let out a few wet coughs.

"Hey, Buddy," said Jonathan as he perched on the edge of Will's bed and caressed his sweaty forehead. Will was burning up just like Eleven. Jonathan was glad his mother had insisted on him taking extra vitamin C that morning. "I decided to make a surprise visit and half of Southern Indiana has the flu."

Will took a moment to catch his breath when he was done coughing. He then looked at Jonathan carefully for a moment as though he was wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him. He then sat up and threw his arms around his brother and buried his face in Jonathan's chest.

Will wanted to tell Jonathan everything, but stopped himself as he just didn't want his brother to worry. He at least wanted to say something about how happy he was to see his brother, but his throat felt like it was on fire. Jonathan started to rub his back.

"I can call the nurse and get you some cough medicine, but we'll make sure it's different from what they gave you last night. Mary said you and Mike were up playing games a few hours ago. I guess some things never change," said Jonathan. Will smiled in spite of himself as he continued to lean into the comfort of his brother's physical presence.

"It sounds like everyone had a pretty good scare last night, but everything seems to be working out for the best. One of the nurses told me that you may just need a simple minimally invasive surgery rather than an outright transplant," Jonathan continued. Will froze. Jonathan strengthened the hug. "I think Mom and Hopper must have forgotten to tell the hospital staff to not mention your condition to me. I know about it and you don't have to stress yourself out trying to keep it from me."

"I'm sorry," said Will. He looked up and his eyes met Jonathan's. "Just please don't worry about me. I'll be okay. Promise me you'll focus on school. You've worked so hard to get there."

"I promise I won't let my school work slip. You're right, I have worked hard. I had you there encouraging me all the way through and that made all the difference in the world, Will."

Will sat there quietly, not knowing what to say. "Did the nurse really say I might not need a full transplant?"

"Yeah, she did. It's good that you came in sick last night or they may not have run the test that gave them that solution."

"That was so stupid," said Will. "If I hadn't been so self absorbed and freaking out last night, I may have noticed that Mike, El, and Julie were looking sick last night too and figured out it was just the flu. It wouldn't surprise me if Dustin, Lucas, and Max are sick too and I was too busy freaking out to notice."

"Okay, Will, how about in addition to my promise to focus on my school work; you promise to stop beating yourself over minor things."

In the next bed, Mike suddenly let out a string of wet coughs. He then looked rigid and Will and Jonathan knew he'd been trying to pretend

he was still asleep.

"It's alright, Mike," said Jonathan. "How much have you heard?"

Mike sat up and faced the Byers brothers. " Since we're all trying to be more honest:I know that you know about Will's condition. I didn't mean to listen though, sorry."

"Will tells you more than he tells anyone else anyway," said Jonathan.

"Yeah, well, that's because I'm awesome. In the name of complete honesty though, I've had to pee really bad for several minutes and have been waiting for the right time to get up and go. I think that moment just presented itself."

Mike hopped out of bed and went into the bathroom and Will and Jonathan both burst out laughing. He knew he wasn't being completely honest with them. He still had the fear of Will dying. He didn't need to burden them with the details of his re-occurring nightmares.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Your daughter caught that flu that's been going around, Chief," said the receptionist at the front desk.

"Can I still see her?" asked Hopper.

"Of course you can."

"Sorry we didn't call you last night when she started getting sick. We tried to call this morning, but no one answered."

"That's alright," said Hopper. "Will and El seem to have come down with this two and they spent the night in the hospital. Our oldest came home from college for a surprise visit too."

"A lot of people came down with it in this hospital, we've been disinfecting everything."

"This seems to be all over the whole damn state," said Hopper.



The nurse stopped outside of Sara's room, unlocked the door, opened it and knocked on the frame.

"Sara, you have a visitor." Sara was laying down on her bed. Her face was pale and puffy. Hopper imagined that Will and Eleven were probably in a similar state. Sara looked up hopefully, then tried to hide the disappointment on her face. Hopper tried not to take it too personally as he was well aware that he wasn't her first choice visitor.

The nurse left and locked the door behind her as Hopper took a seat.

"Where are my dear siblings? They promised to visit me today and they're always talking about the importance of promises."

"They both came down with the flu and had to go to the hospital last night. They asked me to come see you."

"Oh, well I wonder if I got them sick or if it was the other way around. Viruses are the most contagious before symptoms show up... that's what I read at least."

Hopper smiled. Sara always had a great mind, even when she was little. He held out Eleven's corsage from the dance. "El wanted you to have this."

Sara stared at the flowers for a moment then took it from her father's hand and opened it. She sniffed the corsage then rubbed her temples. "I'm sure it smells really good, tell her I said 'thank you. They must have been really sick if they had to go to the hospital."

"Poor Will thought he was having a heart attack. We were all pretty relieved when we found out it was just the flu."

"He's more scared that he's admitting, I can tell."

"Yes he is. He always tries to put on a brave face for everyone. Doesn't want us to worry."

"Do you worry?"

"All the time," said Hopper. He realized he was having the most civil conversation with Sara that they'd had since he found out she was

alive. "I worry about you too, you know."

"What's there to worry about, I'm locked in here so I can't hurt myself!"

"You deserve better than being locked in here, Sara."

"It's not so bad, you know," said Sara. "The doctors and nurses here are actually really nice. It's paradise compared to where I was before."

"But do you want to leave?"

Sara looked her father in the eyes and shrugged. She stared at the floor again. "Maybe."

"I can talk to Dr. Owens."

"I-I don't know if I can."

"Why not?"

"Part of me really wants to get out of here and not have to ask permission to do every little thing. Maybe go to school. But when I think about actually walking out those doors, I just freeze."

Hopper took a deep breath. It was huge that Sara was admitting feeling vulnerable to him. He wanted to choose his words carefully and not cause her to shut down again. He wanted to pull her into a tight hug and comfort her, but she might not want to be hugged.

"I really wanted to leave the war, but was afraid to," he said.

"You were afraid to leave a place where people were dying around you every day?"

"I really wanted to get away from it, but I wasn't sure I'd fit in with the 'real world' after being a part of that war. The MKUltra scientists screwing with our brains didn't help."

Sara pushed herself up and rearranged her pillows so she could prop herself up better. The flu was making it difficult for her to sit up on

her own without getting dizzy. "What did they do to you?"

"I don't really remember. I just have flashes of being dunked in a tank and getting some electroshock therapy. I always thought it had been a bad dream until Doctor Owens showed me the files. That's exactly what they wanted me to think... Just like they wanted me to think you had cancer and died."

Sara folded her hands in front of her face and inhaled sharply. Her eyes flickered over the the solar system model that Eleven and Will had gotten her. She had started to work on it after they left they day before, but started feeling tired (the initial flu symptoms). "They told me you said I liked the solar system..."

"You loved it when you were little. None of the other kids in your class could name all the planets or any of the constellations. You wanted to know about things, so you learned. I always talked about that when I told people about you."

Sara looked from the solar system model to her father. "Did you tell a lot of people about me."

"I told a few people... when it didn't hurt too much to talk. I couldn't bring myself to tell them you were dead-when I thought you were dead-most of the time. I was telling El about you one night after she'd been living with me for almost a year. She asked me who you were and I suddenly realized I'd never mentioned you out loud to her. I was always thinking about you though...*always*."

"Always?"

"Yes, Sara, always. When Will's mom and I were going into the Upside Down to save him, I was constantly thinking about you. When I was keeping El safe from the 'bad men' I was constantly thinking about you. The thought of you drove me to help other people, understand?"

Tears began pouring down Sara's face. Hopper leaned over and put his arm around her. She didn't pull away or tense up so he decided to pull her into a full hug. "El said you read to her. You used to read to me."

"Yes," said Hopper in a barely audible voice.

"I used to make up stories in my head...when I needed to take my mind off of-everything. I imagined those stories were books that you were reading to me."

"Those people took that away from us. I wish I could have spent all those years reading you stories."

There was a knock on the door. Sara and Hopper looked over and saw the handle turn. Doctor Owens entered. He noticed that Sara was crying and Hopper had tears forming in his eyes.

"Is this a bad time?" he asked.

"Maybe," said Hopper. "But I assume you have something important to tell us." Sara pulled away and leaned back on her pillows as she wiped her eyes. Hopper rubbed her shoulder.

"We just got a call from Hawkins General about Will's test results," said Doctor Owens. Sara sat back up.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

"I can talk to you about this later if you want to finish visiting with your daughter, Chief."

"Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it in front of Sara," said Hopper.

"Alright, it's actually some good news: Will may just need a simple operation instead of a complete heart transplant. We want to run a few more tests when he gets over the flu to make sure, but this means we can take care of it and get him out of the woods a lot sooner."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"A wheelchair? Seriously?" said Will as the nurse gestured for him to sit down.

"Sorry, kid, hospital policy," the nurse replied.

"C'mon, sweetheart, let's get this over with," said Joyce as she took a groaning Will's arm and urged him into the chair."

Jonathan had decided to hang back and talk to Mike. "So, what's going on with you?"

"You know, some old stuff," said Mike with a shrug. Jonathan decided to get right to the point.

"I noticed you had that look on your face this morning like something was wrong, but you were trying to pretend everything's alright."

"Just had another bad dream last night, but I'm fine," said Mike.

"Oh, I take it, that killer tomatoes aren't what's bothering you."

"Don't worry about it, it doesn't matter."

"It seems like it does," said Jonathan.

"I had a dream that Will died after his surgery, okay? I've had occasional dreams dreams about Will dying since they pulled that fake body out of the quarry!" Mike wiped a few tears from his eyes. It was the first time he' mentioned those nightmares out loud. Jonathan squeezed his shoulder.

"Have you told Will?"

Mike shook his head. "Why would I bother him with this?"

"He wouldn't consider it bothering. He always wants to be there for you."

"This isn't me being upset about El missing or school or anything in the real world. This is me having nightmares about him dying when he has a life threatening condition. Hopefully, he'll be too distracted to notice something that's only in my head."

"Mike, this is *Will* we're talking about. When he woke up in the hospital for the first time after being in the Upside Down, he was concerned about a cut on my hand. He had been trapped in an evil dimension for a week and had almost died and he was worried about

a cut on my hand. Besides, I noticed that something was going on with you. If I noticed, it's only a matter of time before Will notices."

"What am I supposed to do about it? Take him aside and tell him something that won't help anything?"

"You don't have to take him aside or make an announcement, but if he asks you what's wrong, be honest. He'll worry more if you don't talk to him."

"Fine," said Mike. "I'll tell him the truth \*if\* he asks."

"You're having bad dreams about Will dying, Mike?" asked Eleven as she entered the room. She looked pale. Mike figured that the flu was taking its toll on her just as it had taken its toll on him and Will.

"They're just dreams, El, don't worry about it," said Mike.

"But they're making you sad and scared," said Eleven. She walked up to Mike's bed and put her hands on her hips. Mike was congested, but could smell a clean scent coming off of her. She had obviously recently showered and Mike started to feel self-conscious about not having showered since the morning before. "Why didn't you talk to me?"

"You're already worried enough about Will. I didn't want to bother you or him about this, okay?"

"Okay, I understand," said Eleven. "But Jonathan is right, you should tell Will the truth if he asks you what's wrong." Eleven sat down next to Jonathan and put her head on his shoulder. She missed her older brother and lamented all the time she'd lost with him while in the lab.

"Hey there, Mei mei," said Jonathan as he put his arm around his sister. "Feeling any better?"

Eleven shrugged. "The flu is gross, I don't like it."

Jonathan chuckled. "You're right, it sucks."

"Where's Julie?" asked Mike.

"She was arguing with her mom about going off alone with Will last night because they were bored at the dance, and she's taking a shower when her mom leaves."

"Speaking of showers, Will is probably going to want to take one when he gets back, so I'll get mine in now," said Mike. He hopped off his bed, grabbed his duffle bag and closed the bathroom door behind him.

"Will said you didn't have a Mike when you were growing up," said Eleven. "He also said you had to help pay the bills with your job. That's why he didn't want to tell you about his surgery. He wants your dreams to come true and thinks they won't if you're worried about him."

"HMMM," said Jonathan as he squeezed Eleven's shoulder. "It's my own fault I didn't have a Mike. I convinced myself I didn't like anyone. I didn't try to get to know people. But I have Nancy now and I'm meeting a lot of great people at NYU. I can't wait for you and Will to meet them. As for working to help Mom pay bills-that's Lonnie's fault and no one else. He was a shitty father and didn't pay child support so Mom had to do everything on her own. I think she did a great job, especially with everything that happened."

"You want me to meet your new friends?" asked Eleven. "But I'm weird. I could embarrass you."

"What?" asked Jonathan. "I could never be embarrassed by you. Weird is awesome. Weird changes the world for the better."

Eleven smiled.

"But anyway," Jonathan continued. "Will shouldn't feel guilty about anything. It's his nature to worry about others though."

"He said he had the easiest childhood of the three of us," said Eleven.

"What? How could he think that? He got stuck in the Upside Down and possessed by the shadow monster. Don't get me started on the kids that bullied him."

"He said the Upside Down and the Shadow Monster were only a few

days, and he had Mike, Lucas and Dustin when the other kids were mean to him. But he thinks I had it worse because I was in the lab-

"That's a valid point, I'll give him that."

"-and you had it worse because you didn't have a Mike- or a Lucas or Dustin."

Jonathan smiled and shook his head. "I'm not going to try to argue with him on who had the rougher childhood. I had Will and Mom the whole time and that was pretty. Maybe we should just all focus on helping each other make the rest of our lives better. How does that sound."

"That sounds good," said Eleven. "And we can help Sara too."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Are you sure you want to schedule your surgery at the beginning of Christmas break?" Joyce ask Will as they sat in the consultation office after the doctor left to call Dr. Owens in Bloomington.

"Yeah, I'm sure," said Will. "I want to miss as little school as possible. I also have a couple months to get some assignments done ahead of time so I don't fall behind."

Joyce sighed as she rubbed Will's arm. If she told him he was pushing himself too hard for the millionth time, he wasn't likely to listen anyway.

"You're right, we have time to plan. Why don't I get you back to your room. You can spend a little time with your brother before we have to leave. The hospital isn't letting us bend the rules on visitation hours today."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Are you sure this is what you want to do today?" Joyce asked Jonathan as they unpacked the ingredients for the lasagna.

"Yeah, I mean I live in a dorm room so I never get to cook," said Jonathan. "I took it for granted all those years."



They took a seat on the sofa while the meat simmered in the crock pot. "Do you remember reading to Will and El when I was pregnant with them?" asked Joyce.

"I could read when I was three?" asked Jonathan.

"Well, no, but you turned the pages and made up words. You wanted to tell the baby-babies- stories. That's what you said to me. You were always such a good big brother."

"I wish I could have had more time to be a good big brother to El," said Jonathan.

"Yeah, me too. I think that maybe those stories you told her and Will before they were born stuck with her all those years she was in that horrible place. She's always had a natural goodness about her-always wanting to help people-despite being raised by that psycho. Will has always wanted to help people too. Maybe you had something to do with that, Jonathan."

"You probably had a lot to do with that, Mom."

"I really do miss you, Jonathan. But I'm so happy that you're away from this town and doing what you've always wanted. I'll miss Will and El too when they leave for college. But I want them to get away from this town too."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Eleven woke up from her nap around 1:30 in the afternoon. Julie was sitting on her bed reading a magazine.

"Have a good snooze?" asked Julie.

"I guess," said Eleven. She rubbed her eyes. Her face felt puffy.

Julie shut her magazine and tossed it on the nightstand. "You wanna go over and hang out with the boys while our parents aren't here to lecture us about every little thing?"

"Maybe," said Eleven. She got up and walked over to the mirror. Her hair had still been a little damp when she went to sleep and it was

completely disheveled. The bags under her eyes were swollen and her nose was red and raw. "Maybe not, don't want Mike to see me like this."

Julie gave an exasperated sigh and hopped off her own bed. Her own hair was disheveled and her face was swollen. She put her arm around Eleven and looked in the mirror. "You still look pretty," she said. Eleven spared her a skeptical glance. "You do and Mike will think so too."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Think about it. Whenever Mike had gotten sick or injured haven't you wanted to hug and cuddle with him more?"

"Yes, probably. I wanted to make him feel better."

"Exactly!" said Julie. "And if we want to cuddle our boyfriends when they get sick to make them feel better, don't you think they'd want to do the same for us?"

"Good point, let's go," said Eleven as she tugged on Julie's arm.

When they got into Mike and Will's room the boys were sitting on the floor looking like they were just finishing a serious conversation. Eleven figured that Will must have noticed something was off and gotten Mike to tell him about the nightmares.

"Don't you like your beds?" asked Julie.

"We feel cold all the time, but when we get under our blankets, we get all sweaty and gross," said Will as he and Mike got to their feet. "It's a catch-22."

"This hospital has cable," said Mike. "Why don't we watch a movie."

The four teenagers struggled to find comfortable positions on the two hospital beds. "These beds suck!" said Eleven.

"C'mon, you know this is the most romantic double date ever," said Mike.

"Have the flu makes everything awesome," said Julie as she settled into a position where Will rested his head on her stomach and she began caressing his hair.

After flipping through the channels, they decided to watch "Friday the 13th." Will seemed to be the only one who wasn't scared of the movie. When they asked him about it, he shrugged and said that it was just a movie.

The phone rang and everyone but Will jumped. When he answered it, a familiar voice was on the other end.

"Hey asshole!" said Dustin. "What's up with you disappearing without telling us last night, we were worried."

"How did you know we were here?" asked Will. He mouthed that it was Dustin to Mike.

"Randy told us," said Lucas.

"I'm glad you called," said Will. "Do you think you could get my homework for me?"

"Well, at least you're still yourself," said Lucas.

"You don't have to worry about that for a couple days," said Dustin. "So many people have the flu, they canceled school at least until Wednesday. So relax for once in your life."

"I am relaxing, actually," said Will. "They did some tests and found out I just need a minor surgery instead of a full transplant. I'm getting it during Christmas Break."

"That's great!" said Lucas. "The flu is awesome."

"We were just saying the same thing," said Will.

"Looks like you're not trying so hard to keep the surgery a secret anymore," said Mike as Will hung up the phone.

"Well, I'm not going to make an announcement about it," said Will. "But I'm not going to stress myself out trying to keep it a secret

anymore."

"You're making progress, my friend," said Mike.

"I know, it's amazing," said Will.

"It's more than amazing, it's epic," said Mike.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Chapter 7

*24 Hours to go...*

"You tried, Will, no one can fault you for that," said Dustin as the party left the classroom after their chemistry exam.

"Kaminski's a cold uncaring bastard," said Will. "But the joke's on him, I aced that exam. He's going to feel really stupid about not letting us skip it."

"That's another thing I miss about Mr. Clarke," said Lucas. "At least he would have thought you trying to use your impending surgery to get us out of the final funny."

"It got us out of detention though," said Mike.

"Kaminski's a mouth breather," said Eleven.

"We'll see you after school," said Will as he and Julie headed to their art exam. They had spent the last couple days taking their semester exams. Fifth period was the last exam for everyone. It was a bit of a cool down for Will and Julie after Chemistry. They had a half day of school and an afternoon off to look forward to.

Will's surgery was scheduled for the next and he needed to get plenty of sleep before going to Bloomington early. He had been focusing really hard on studying for his exams in order to take his mind off the surgery.

"At least we're halfway through Kaminski's class! Just a little over five months to go," said Julie as she noticed the worried look on Will's face and realized that his mind was wondering to the surgery. She squeezed his hand and he smiled at her.

"We'll survive it," said Will lightly.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*22 hours to go....*

"Let's take one more trip backstage before break," said Julie after the art exam was over.

"People might be there," said Will.

"Are you kidding?" asked Julie. "They all just finished their exams, they'll want to get there hell out of this building."

"Okay," said Will. "But Jonathan should be here soon to pick us up." Jonathan and Nancy had gotten home for the break a couple days earlier after finishing their first exams at NYU.

"Then we'll hurry," said Julie as she tugged on his wrist. When they got to the stage door, Will noticed that Julie didn't grab the key from behind the plaque before she opened the door.

It turned out that Will didn't need to worry about Jonathan waiting for them in the parking lot because he was in the backstage room... along with several other people that included the party members, the decathlon team, drama club members and a couple of Lucas and Dustin's baseball teammates and some orchestra members Will had befriended when he went to Julie's orchestra concerts and competitions.

The room looked festive. There were Christmas decorations everywhere.

"There you are, Byers," said Dustin. "It's about damn time!"

"What's going on?" asked Will. He felt a blush creeping up his face.

"It's just a typical Christmas party," said Jonathan.

"We all chipped in and got you this," said Tim Wilson as he stepped forward and handed Will a Dragon Quest game with a bow on it. "You need to play something other than Zelda."

"Thanks," said Will as he took the game from Tim. "If this is a typical Christmas party, why isn't everyone else opening presents?"

"Don't think of it as a Christmas present," said Lucas. "Think of it as a birthday present that's nine months late or three months early."

The Christmas party was relatively short because so many people had to go to their part time jobs in the final rush before Christmas and others were going out of town, but everyone helped with the clean up.

Will, Mike, Eleven, Julie, Lucas, Max, Dustin, Cathy, Randy, Tim, Jennifer and Dave all decided to catch a matinee showing of "The Golden Child." It was a mix of fantasy, horror and comedy, so everyone loved it.

*12 hours to go...*

That night, the friends who were in on the secret that Eleven was actually Will's twin sister (Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Julie) stayed the night. Hopper and Joyce insisted that everyone go to sleep by 10:30. They all decided to build experience points in Dragon Quest. Without caffeinated drinks, it was enough to make them feel drowsy. They fell asleep in the living room until Jonathan woke them up. The boys all went to Will's room while the girls went to Eleven's room.

*6 hours to go...*

Will drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the night. Luke sat next to him purring while Chester rested in the dog bed. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were all sound asleep on their cots. Suddenly, the lights on the street lamps flicked outside of his window. Will's eyes were wide open. He threw off his covers and tiptoed to the window. The bulb in the lamp closer to the house was dim. It just needed to be replaced. Will glanced around his room to reassure himself it wasn't covered in rotting snot and floating dandruff. He then looked back at the dimming light in the lamp post outside.

Will leaned his head against the cold window. He closed his eyes and reminded himself that the Upside Down was gone. He ran his fingers over his chest thinking of out this was the last night it would be without a scar from open heart surgery. *Small price to pay, Byers, small price to pay.*

Will opened his eyes and saw that his breath had fogged up the window. He drew a smiley face with his finger and stood back to admire his work. Will then grabbed his sketch book and some pencils from his desk. He went out to the hallway and sat at the top of the stairs. He was in the final two hours (for at least the next few weeks) that he'd be able to walk up and down the stairs or even just to the kitchen or bathroom on his own.

Will leaned against the wall, propped the open sketchbook on his knee and began to draw. The Christmas lights lit up the hallway enough for a decent perspective drawing. Will glanced at the door to Jonathan's bedroom. He remembered having nightmares at the old house and going to Jonathan when he was really little. He never went to his mother until after Lonnie left.

Will hadn't thought about his nightmares in years. But the specifics came flooding to him in that moment. They were about being locked in a small, windowless room...at Hawkins Lab. He'd been dragged kicking and screaming by a couple of orderlies...only it hadn't been him in his dreams...it had been Eleven.

Will had never made that connection. He'd never remembered the specifics of his nightmares after he'd woken up, just the feelings of terror. Eleven had told him about how Brenner would lock in her a room as punishment when she didn't obey him. She had told him about how she had her own now memories when he was in danger, yet Will had never made his own connection until that moment. He would always shut down when he had to go to Hawkins Lab for his check ups. It was like he had bad memories of the place, but they weren't his memories, they were his sister's.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Mike woke up and saw Dustin and Lucas sleeping in their cots. He turned over to check on Will, but only saw blankets thrown aside on his bed. Mike shot up and stopped himself just before he screamed Will's name. He walked over to a sleeping Chester and nudged him awake.

"Hey boy," Mike whispered. "Think you can find Will?"



Chester lifted his head and started sniffing the air. He then got up, pushed the door that Will had left slightly ajar a few minutes earlier, and went out into the hallway as Mike followed. Will was sitting at the top of the stairs drawing as he always did when he had a lot on his mind. Mike had a stack of drawings from moments that Will had a lot on his mind.

Chester went up to Will and shoved his nose under Will's arm. Will started absently scratching behind Chester's ear and looked up to notice Mike.

"Hey, Mike."

"Couldn't sleep?" asked Mike as he sat next to Will at the top of the stairs. Will shrugged.

"I'm sure I'll get plenty of sleep tomorrow-I mean later today," said Will as he noticed that the clock on the wall showed that it was 4:45 am. It wouldn't be long before everyone else started waking up. They planned to leave for Bloomington around 7:30. "You probably need sleep more than I do."

"Nah," said Mike. "Chairs in hospital waiting rooms are notoriously comfortable."

Excellent point," said Will. He went back to drawing and Mike just sat quietly with him for another hour until the others started waking up.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*3 hours to go....*

Getting ready for the trip to Bloomington was a quiet ordeal in the morning consisting of loading things into the cars. No one ate breakfast as they didn't want to eat in front of Will, who wasn't allowed to eat because he had a surgery scheduled. Will, Jonathan, Julie and Joyce were going to ride in Hopper's truck. Karen arrived with Nancy around seven to take Mike and Eleven. Steve also arrived to take Dustin, Lucas and Max.

Will packed some mixtapes to play in the car. He really didn't feel like listening to everyone telling him it was going to be ok.

"Are you okay, Will?" asked Joyce as she caressed his cheek while they stood outside of the truck.

"Yeah, Mom, I just had trouble sleeping last night. Don't worry."

"I'll grab a pillow in case you get sleepy," said Jonathan as he ran into the house one last time.

"Jonathan, you don't have to...fine, thanks." Will shivered and Joyce rubbed his back.

"Are you cold?" she asked.

"Hopper will have the heat on in the truck, I'll be fine," said Will as Jonathan came out with a pillow and a couple of blankets. Will felt irritable. He told himself because he was hungry and couldn't eat or because he just wanted to relax and enjoy the break, but he had to go get surgery. Maybe he was just tired, that was it. He turned to Julie. "I'll take the middle seat."

"You don't have to do that," she answered.

"Are you kidding? It's mandatory that I do that because A: I'm still a gentleman and B: I can't have my handsome college brother sitting between us because I'm the type of guy who's extremely jealous and insecure; and C:" Will leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Propping the pillow on your leg will be a lot more comfortable than trying to prop it against the window."

"You're about to have surgery, I'll take pity on you," Julie replied dryly.

When they got into the car, Will put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes while Joyce popped in one of Jonathan's mix tapes. Will decided to pretend to fall asleep so he didn't have to talk to anyone. He felt himself relaxing as Julie caressed his head, but he was so tired from getting no sleep the night before that he actually did drift off to sleep and the next thing he knew Jonathan was gently shaking him awake.

*90 minutes to go...*

As he got out of the car and headed to the building with his family and friends, the thought that this would be the last time he was walking without help for a while occurred to him. He felt as though he was in a trance.

*80 minutes to go.....*

Sara was there to greet him and the others when they got to the waiting room. Apparently she had to go to a group therapy session that morning, but wanted to wish him luck before the surgery. He thanked her and told her that he looked forward to her visiting them in Hawkins.

*70 minutes to go...*

Dustin told Will that a magazine article he'd read recommended getting up to level 21 of Dragon Quest before trying to take on the dragon lord. He said they should spend the break building experience points.

Lucas and Max promised to bring him his homework every day when the break was over, but teased that he had done enough assignments ahead of time that he could probably just relax for once in his life.

*60 minutes to go...*

Mike just quietly hugged him and Julie did the same. They both looked like they were trying to put on brave faces. Will understood that all too well. He was still in a daze as he walked down the hallway to the prep room with his mother, step father-no *father*-brother and sister.

*45 minutes to go...*

Will went behind a curtain to change out of his clothes. He didn't like only wearing a pair of hospital issued pajama bottoms when everyone else was fully clothed.

*30 minutes to go...*

Will barely listened as Dr. Owens came in with a nurse and a surgeon to explain the procedure. What did he care, he was going to be

unconscious the whole time. Will felt Eleven taking his hand. He looked over at her and tried to smile reassuringly, but the smile felt stiff. He remembered the realization that the nightmares he'd so often experienced as a kid were a psychic connection to her. He'd lost so much time with his sister and didn't want to lose any more time.

*20 minutes to go...*

Will remembered Mike coming and sitting with him when he couldn't sleep just a few hours earlier. He'd barely spoken and Mike had just sat there quietly and never tried to make him talk. He should have talked to Mike. What if he never saw Mike again. What if the doctor who was about to cut his freaking chest open was connected to the people who had taken Eleven and almost taken him when they were born?

*15 minutes to go...*

He shouldn't have fallen asleep on the ride over. Why had he tried so hard to avoid talking to anyone in the car? His mother who had always been there for him was sitting in the front seat. His big brother who he'd missed so much for all those months was sitting right next to him. Will saw the nurse prepping the anesthesia machine. It made a weird sound. *10 minutes to go...* Hopper had been sitting in the front seat. He'd been a good father to Will. Doctor Owens continued to explain what they would need to do after the operation. Sara had come to wish him luck. Why hadn't he said more to her. She was still stuck in the hospital trying to get better. The buttons in the sleeping gas machine lit up. *5 minutes to go...* His friends had been there in the waiting room. He hadn't even thanked them for coming. *4 minutes to go...* What if he never went to a decathlon meet or one of Julie's concerts again. *3 minutes to go..* What if they never got a chance to sneak backstage again? *2 minutes to go...* What if he and Mike never got to design their video games or write their comic? What if he never got to visit Jonathan in New York? *1 minute to go,,*

The nurse walked over with the gas mask and was about to put it on Will's face. *30 seconds..* What if this was the last time he was awake?  
*1 second-*

"No!" Will shouted in a panicked voice as he quickly pushed the mask away. "I'm not ready. I can't do this. I don't want to do this!"

His mother was at his side in an instant, pulling him into a hug and kissing his forehead. "Sssh! It's okay, baby, you're alright."

"Let's give them a couple minutes," said Doctor Owens. The medical personnel left the room and only Will's family members remained.

"I'm sorry," said Will as tears poured down his cheeks. His hands trembled as he hastily wiped them away. He hopped out of the bed, walked over to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. He then grabbed a towel and held it to his face as he took deep breaths.

"You don't have to do this today if you don't want to," said Hopper and he walked over to him and put his hand on his step son's shoulder. Will lowered the towel covering his face and looked up at Hopper. His eyes then flickered over to his mother, Jonathan and Eleven. He couldn't postpone the surgery for very long. There was a small chance that he would die on the operating table, but the chance of him dying if he didn't get the surgery was almost certain.

"I just want to get this over with," said Will as he threw the towel at the sink, he picked it up and draped it back over the rack. "I was just having a stupid last minute freak out, sorry."

"That's okay," said Jonathan. "You have a good reason. You don't have to put on a brave face for us."

"And you *really* don't have to be sorry, baby," said Joyce as she walked over and brushed a few stray hairs from his forehead.

"I know," said Will. "But I am. Let's just call in the doctors."

"You ready for this, Will?" asked Hopper.

"No," said Will. "But the sooner we let them start, the sooner they'll be don't. I'm ready for this to be over."

"Wait here a minute," said Joyce. "Hopper and I just need to ask them a couple quick questions before they get started."

"Okay," said Will. Joyce led him back over to his bed and kissed his forehead.

"El, why don't sit with your brother for a minute?" said Joyce to her daughter. Eleven nodded and sat next to Will as Hopper and Joyce headed out to the hallway. Jonathan leaned against the doorway and watched his mother and Hopper talking to Doctor Owens. He looked back at his younger siblings and gave them a small smile.

Eleven gently rested her hands on the side of Will's face and closed her eyes. Will felt the anxiety leaving him. He saw flashes of his thoughts from the past 24 hours and knew that Eleven could see and feel those thoughts. Will saw Jonathan look at them curiously.

"How?" he asked Eleven. He noticed that her nose wasn't bleeding.

"Don't know, just thought I'd try," said Eleven with a shrug.

"Thank you," said Will with a small smile. He seemed completely calm as the doctors and nurse entered the room with his parents. "I'm ready," Will told them. "Sorry about that."

"Don't worry, kid," said Doctor Owens. "It happens all the time. That was actually one of the more mild incidents."

Eleven stepped back to get out of the nurse's way. She felt Jonathan put his arm around her and squeeze her shoulder. She reached up and squeezed his hand, but never took her eyes off of Will. He layed back down and stared at the ceiling as the Nurse prepared the anesthesia. His eyes flicked over and made contact with his sister's. He smiled and she smiled back weakly.

The nurse put the mask over Will's face, but this time he remained calm. His eyes slowly drifted shut and Eleven felt tears forming in her eyes. Jonathan gave her shoulder another squeeze. The nurse put some sort of cooling pack on Will and gave him a shot that was supposed to slow his heart down. Eleven knew they had to lower Will's body temperature for the surgery, but still wanted to scream at the nurse to stop because Will didn't like it cold. The nurse then put a cap over Will's head to cover his hair. They wheeled Will's bed out of the room and the remaining Byers-Hopper family members were

alone in the room.

Eleven started outright sobbing and Joyce walked right up to her and pulled her into a hug. "It's okay, Sweetheart, your brother's going to be just fine. The next few hours are just going to be a little rough."

Hopper and Jonathan joined Joyce in engulfing Eleven in a hug. She sobbed even harder. She knew that Will would be alright. That wasn't entirely what she was crying about. She had seen his thoughts and felt his fear. She was aware of Will's epiphany that the nightmares he'd had as a kid were her own memories. She'd never truly been alone.

"Let's go out back to the waiting room and sit with the others," Jonathan suggested. "Mike will feel better if you're there with him."

"Okay," said Eleven. "But, I want to wash my face first. Don't want them to know I've been crying, it will scare them more."

"Let's get you cleaned up," said Joyce as she rested her hand on Eleven's back and guided her over to the sink.

Eleven splashed cold water (cold like the packs they had put on Will to lower his body temperature. Will hated the cold) in her eyes then grabbed the same towel that her brother had used a few minutes earlier. As the towel was pressed against Eleven's eyes, she saw a vision of Will in the operating room. He had a blue cloth covering him. There was a hole in the middle of the cloth that exposed his chest. A doctor took a scalpel and began making an incision in Will's chest. Eleven wanted to scream at all the people in the room to get away from her brother. Eleven's hand clenched the towel harder against her face. She felt her mother rubbing between her shoulder blades.

"They're starting," said Eleven as she lowered the towel from her face. Her mother was still standing next to her and she saw her father and brother reflecting in the mirror.

"They means they'll be finished sooner," said Hopper.

"Finished sooner," Eleven repeated. She knew that Will had been

scared for months about the surgery. She also knew that he wasn't scared that that very moment. He wasn't anything except unconscious. Eleven wasn't sure if she found comfort in the fact that Will wouldn't be scared during the surgery or scared about the fact that Will was simply defenseless at that moment.

"And the doctors know that if anything happens to Will, they'll have everyone in this room and everyone in the waiting room to deal with. We're a pretty scary bunch. Eleven smiled.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Eleven walked right up to Mike and sat down next to him when she and her conscious immediate family members got back to the waiting. She was still clutching the towel that Will had used. Dustin and Lucas both looked at her like they had a million questions, but not the words to ask them. Julie was staring at the floor. Max's eyes were flickering around the room as though she was making sure everyone was alright.

"Did anyone have breakfast this morning?" asked Mrs. Wheeler. Will's friends all shook their heads. Maybe you can go to the cafeteria and get yourselves something to eat.

"No," said Mike. "If Will doesn't get to eat, then I'm not eating either."

"Honey, he's going to be in surgery for a few hours. Starving yourself won't help him," said Karen. Mike jumped to his feet.

"Yes, Mom, he's in surgery. They're cutting him open right now, just like we did to those frogs in biology. I can't eat while they're doing that to Will. I CAN'T!" Mike turned and punched the wall.

"Mike," said Eleven pointedly as she got to her feet. "I want to go for a walk, I need some air."

Mike looked at her for a moment, then nodded his head. Dustin and Lucas recognized the tone in Eleven's voice and didn't offer to go with them.

"Wait a minute, you two," said Joyce. "Get your coats on. Will's going to want to see both of you when he wakes up and you won't be



allowed in the room if you catch pneumonia."

They both nodded and complied. Eleven turned to Julie and handed her the towel. "Here, Will used this." Julie nodded and clutched the towel.

Eleven saw Max take a seat next to Julie out of the corner of her eye and she and Mike headed down the hall to the exit. The frigid early winter air stung their faces. They were in the courtyard of the facility. Eleven remembered a lot of people walking around it during the summer months when she and Will went there for their monthly check ups. It was empty the morning of Will's surgery. Eleven and Mike brushed a thin layer of snow off a bench and took a seat.

Eleven rested her head on Mike's shoulder. He put his arm around her, pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. "He was scared, wasn't he?" asked Mike.

"How did you know?" asked Eleven.

"It took longer than expected for you, Jonathan and your parents to come back out, you were clinging pretty hard to that towel he used, and your eyes were still a little red," said Mike as he ticked off each point by raising one finger at a time. "That and the fact that *I'm* terrified and so are you. If we're terrified just thinking about Will going through this, he's probably terrified of actually going through it."

"Yes," said Eleven quietly.

"As much as we've all been telling ourselves that this is a simple operation all these months, it's still scary. Will was super quiet this morning. That means he was holding it all in."

"He regretted that," said Eleven.

"Being quiet?" asked Mike. Eleven tilted her head slightly to look Mike in the eyes.

"Not talking to you more this morning when you sat with him by the stairs," said Eleven.

"He said that?"

"No, I-I saw some of his thoughts and memories when I was trying to help him not be scared. He wished he had talked more to everyone on the way her and before he went into the room. It's why he got scared before they made in breathe the sleeping gas."

"Well... We all understand. I mean, we'll get plenty of time with him when he wakes up and after he heals. He'll be okay.. He'll *be okay*. This waiting just really sucks."

"Yeah, it *really* sucks," said Eleven. They sat there quietly letting the wind sting their faces. Will was the most important person in the world to them. Sure, he was important to Mike because they were each other's first and closest friend. He was important to Eleven as her long lost twin with whom she'd been cheated so much time thanks to Papa; but Will was important to them. Mike and Eleven found each other because they were trying to save Will. Mike had looking his oldest and dearest friend and Eleven had been looking for a boy (who had turned out to be her long lost brother) she'd seen was in danger from the Demogorgan and wanted to save. Yes, Will was very important to *them*.

"Will hates the cold," said Mike.

"They made him cold after they put him to sleep," said Eleven. She reached up to Mike's arm that was around her shoulders and intertwined her fingers with him. Memories of hiding in the woods for over a month after saving Mike, Dustin and Lucas came flooding back to her brain. She agreed with Will. She hated the cold. She noticed the time on Mike's watch. "Sara should be done with her group meeting. Let's go see her."

"Will she even want to see me?" asked Mike. "She doesn't even know me." He'd briefly met her that morning as she came in to wish Will luck before his surgery, but there really wasn't time to make a meaningful connection.

"Will and I told her good things about you and Sarah trusts us, so she'll like you...And I really hate the cold."

"Okay, let's go see Sara," said Mike.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Will the Wise," said Sara thoughtfully as she took Will's D&D figure from Mike and examined it with a bemused smile. "You carry this around with you, Mike?"

"We don't play as much as we used to," said Mike. There was a hint of regret in his voice. "I just decided to keep that piece with me today while he was in surgery."

"Oh," said Sara. She clutched the tiny wizard figure and closed her eyes. Mike started to ask her what she was doing, but Eleven put her hand on his arm and held her finger to her lips. Sara's expression changed from bemused to happy to sad several times over the next few minutes. She opened her eyes and looked at Mike curiously before handing him back the tiny wizard.

"Looks like it's a good thing that you and Will have people you can trust. Kids like us don't get that very often," Sara said to Eleven.

"What just happened?" asked Mike.

"I thought Will and Eleven told you everything," said Sara.

"Wasn't our secret to tell," said Eleven.

"I'm psychic and was sold to a corporation to spy on other corporations," Sara told Mike and as she tossed the miniature wizard back at time. Mike panicked as he nearly dropped it and sighed with relief as he clutched the tiny figure. Sara folded her arms and casually leaned against the wall.

"Sara," came a gruff, but familiar voice from behind Mike, further startling him. "You really need to be careful with other people's things."

"Right, Dad," said Sara. "Sorry, Mike."

"Don't worry about it," said Mike as he pocketed the tiny Wizard.

"Is Will's surgery done?" asked Eleven hopefully.

"There's still a couple hours before they finish, sweetheart," said Joyce as she pulled Eleven into a one arm hug. "They can't rush these things" Eleven rested her head on her mother's shoulder and closed her eyes. Mike could see them moving under her eyelids and knew she was checking on Will. She gasped and opened her eyes.

"Were you checking on Will?" asked Hopper. Eleven nodded. "El, you have to be careful."

"Telepathy with Will doesn't hurt me," Eleven answered irritably. "Doesn't hurt Will either."

"Did you use telepathy before to surgery to help him calm down?" asked Joyce.

"Used instincts," said Eleven. Instincts had been a word of the day for her while staying in Hopper's cabin. It may have been her favorite word as it described her relationship with her brother- even before she'd learned he was her brother, she'd always had good instincts about him. "Saw his thoughts. He had regrets."

"Regrets?" asked Joyce.

"He wished he had talked to everyone more today. Like in the car on the way here, or Mike this morning. And Sara, he wished he'd talked to Sara more." Eleven felt a little guilty for telling her brother's private thoughts, but felt his friends and family should know about them.

"Me?" asked Sara. "He regretted not talking more to me?"

"You're his friend," said Eleven matter-of-factly. "His sister."

Sara looked surprised, but pleased. "I guess it's nice to have someone who cares about me."

"You have quite a few people who care about you, Sara," said Hopper.

"Sorry, Dad, I didn't mean..."

"Don't worry about it, honey," said Hopper.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Karen Wheeler looked around the waiting room at people who had barely moved in the last four hours. Will Byers being in the hospital seemed to have that effect on people. Nancy held Jonathan's hand as he stared at the ceiling. Lucas and both sat with their elbows on their knees and their faces in their hands while Steve twirled his car keys on his fingers. Max and Julie were too flustered and gave up on their game of cat's cradle.

Karen looked up to see Joyce coming down the hall followed by Hopper, Mike, Eleven, and Hopper's daughter Sara. Karen mused, for the millionth time, about how she'd simply been a friendly acquaintance of Joyce's when they were children, but their children had become as close as anyone could be. Jonathan had become Nancy's closest friend after Barb died. Mike and Will had been best friends since the day they met, and Joyce's long lost daughter had hidden in Karen's basement and fallen in love with Mike. Karen would never have predicted that when they were younger even though she'd always had an odd admiration for Joyce.

"Any news?" Karen asked Joyce. Joyce looked at her watch and bit her lip.

"We were about to ask you the same thing. They should be almost finished by now," said Joyce.

"I'm sure everything's fine, Mom," said Jonathan. "They're probably just double checking everything, you know Dr. Owens."

"Yeah," Joyce nodded as she took a seat. Hopper sat next to her. Eleven took Sara over to give her a better introduction to Max and Julie than she'd had time for before her group therapy. Mike took a seat next to his mother.

"Sorry about earlier, didn't mean to snap at you, Mom."

"It's okay, Mike. Are you feeling better?" asked Karen as she rubbed Mike's arm. Mike shrugged. Karen looked around at the other kids in

the waiting room. She'd tried to get them to eat something after Mike and Eleven went for their walk. Julie had said that she agreed with Mike about not eating until Will could eat and everyone else had followed suit. Karen thought that maybe if she could get Mike to eat something, the rest of the teenagers might follow. She didn't want them passing out. That wouldn't do Will any good. "Would you like something to eat now?"

Mike shook his head. "I think I'll puke if I eat."

The group sat in agonizing silence for the next 45 minutes. Karen saw Steve giving Dustin encouraging pats on the shoulder every few minutes. Mike went over and sat next to Eleven with the other girls. They seemed to have lost their voices.

Everyone leapt to their feet when Dr. Owens finally came out with the surgeon. Joyce seemed to sway a little with anxiety and Hopper pulled her into a one arm hug. Fortunately, Doctor Owens got right to the point.

"The surgery went really well," said Doctor Owens. "We're taking him to recovery. He should be awake soon."

The people in the waiting room all visibly relaxed. "Can we see him?" asked Joyce.

"Sure, follow me. We'll walk and talk," said Doctor Owens. "Before we go, has anyone been coughing or sneezing today?" Everyone shook their heads. "Good, make sure you all wash your hands before you go in. We want to keep the room as germ free as possible."

"What other precautions should we take?" asked Hopper as the group headed down the hall.

"We'd like to keep him here until Monday morning just to be safe," said Doctor Owens. "He's going to need a lot of rest over the next couple weeks, so he'll probably miss the first week of school after the break. We can make a trip to Hawkins to check on the healing so you don't have to bring him back here."

"Thank you," said Joyce.

Doctor Owens explained a few more things as they continued down the hall, mostly about keeping the wound clean. He told them that's he'd given them a packet as a guide. Everyone stopped to wash their hands and hang their coats and hats up in a closet next to Will's recovery room.

Mike was relieved that he could see Will breathing as they entered the room, surrounded his bed and waited for him to wake up. There was a bandage on his chest covering the incision.. Karen, Nancy and Steve stood back as they weren't as close to Will as the others. Sara started to stand back as well, but Eleven grabbed her arm.

"You're Will's sister," said Eleven. "He'll want to see you." Hopper smiled and gave Sara an encouraging nod.

It was almost another fifteen minutes before Will's eyes started to flutter. He was clearly disoriented as he stared at the ceiling for a minute, or came close to staring. His eyes were unfocused. He looked over at his mother and Jonathan then reached up and brushed his fingers over the bandage on his chest. His friends had to fight the urge to hug him. It was an old habit.

"It's over," Will mused.

"Yeah, Bud. The surgery went really well and you're going to be fine," said Jonathan.

"Good," said Will. He noticed everyone gathered around him. He was pleased to see them, but felt as awkward as he always did when he was the center of attention. He pushed himself into a sitting position and winced.

"Will, honey, you need to take it easy," said Joyce as she put her hands on his shoulders. She didn't try to push him back into a resting position as she feared it might put too much strain on the incision.

"I'm okay, Mom," said Will. "I just, you know, wanna face everyone."

"I'll just adjust the bed and pillows then," said Joyce. She pulled the lever on the bed and fluffed the pillows, then gently prodded Will into resting on them. He didn't really have the energy to resist. He

made a face like he was going to ask for something then stopped himself. "What is it, baby?" asked Joyce as she caresses the side of his head. "Can I get you something?"

Will looked like he felt guilty for asking. It was a look Mike recognized all too well. Will always wanted to do things for himself and never liked asking for help. "Water?" asked Will timidly.

"I got it," said Jonathan. There was already a pitcher of ice water ready for Will. Jonathan poured him some and dropped a straw in the glass and held it out to Will, who bit his lip in embarrassment. "It's alright Will. You just had a life saving surgery. Let us help you out while you're recovering."

"Sorry," Will muttered as he took the straw and started drinking.

"Are you hungry, Will?" asked Karen. "Your friends here refused to eat until you could."

"What?" Will exclaimed causing him to dribble some of the water he was drinking. "Shit!"

"It's okay," said Joyce as she grabbed a paper towel. "We'll get that cleaned up."

"Guys, you can't starve yourselves because of me!" said Will.

"Wanna bet?" said Dustin.

"It's flu season. I don't want you getting sick!" said Will.

"Well, having lunch didn't feel right while you were having surgery. I may have puked if I tried to eat," said Mike.

"Jesus! Would you all knock it off with the whole feeling guilty," said Steve from the back of the room. "Shit happens. None of you have anything to feel guilty about and all you're doing is making each other feel more guilty-over nothing!"

Everyone turned and stared at Steve. "Sorry, that may have been out of line," said Steve.



"Nah, you were right," said Dustin.

"He does have a point," said Jonathan. "We should all work on that. Could be a good New Years resolution."

A nurse came in pushing a cart. "I brought you something for the pain, Mr. Byers. We have a couple options." There were pills and needles on the cart.

"No! Thank you," said Will. "I'm fine."

"Mr, Byers, you're going to be needing plenty of rest. The pain can make it hard to sleep. These will help."

"I don't want any pain medication, I'd rather deal with the pain. It's not that bad." said Will. He turned to face Joyce and away from the nurse. He clutched his pillow and his lower lip started trembling. A tear fell down his cheek.

"Hey," said Joyce as she squeezed his shoulder. "What's wrong?" Will merely shook his head.

Eleven walked over from where she'd been standing next to Sara at the foot of the bed and put her hand on her mother arm. Joyce looked up at her and Eleven nodded. Joyce stood back and let Eleven closer to Will.

Eleven reached down and brushed Will's hair out of his face. She rested her hand on the side of his head. Will looked up and met her eyes. Eleven gazed at him for a moment and closed her eyes. "I understand," she said as she opened them. She then leaned over and pressed her forehead to Will's and closed her eyes again for a moment as though she was recalling a painful memory.

"Thanks, El," said Will with a small smile. Eleven stood up, turned around and faced the nurse.

"My brother doesn't want to be drugged anymore. We should respect his wishes," said Eleven boldly.

"Alright," said the Nurse. "Let me know if he changes his mind. He's in a lot of pain."

"He was in much worse pain another time," said Eleven. Mike suddenly realized why Will didn't want to take the pain medication. He knew what Eleven had seen when she had just looked into Will's mind. It was his memory of the night he'd collapsed in agony when she soldiers started burning the vines in the tunnels. Mike recalled that horrible night very vividly. The doctors had to heavily sedate Will and when he woke up, the Mind Flayer was in control.

Hopper and Joyce had the same expression on their faces. They had been there when Will couldn't remember anyone but Mike or Joyce. Mike recalled the emotionless look in Will's eyes as he recalled who Mike was. Even then it was more like he was guessing, because it was no longer Will who was speaking at that moment. That was when the Mind Flayer was starting to spy back, something that had terrified Will.

Mike remembered when they'd both been in the hospital a year earlier after getting into a fight with Troy. Will had hit his head really hard and had refused to take anything stronger than aspirin. Mike hadn't put two and two together then, even though Will had mentioned having a flashback to the Mind Flayer possessing him. "Aspirin." said Mike. "How about that?" Will looked over at him and nodded.

"Would you guys mind getting yourselves something to eat? I just woke up and don't need you all passing out in here," said Will. He winced a little as he leaned back into his pillows and closed his eyes.

Doctor Owens had told Joyce and Hopper to expect some mood swings and irritability from Will while he was healing. Will had overheard this as they thought he was asleep. He'd been drifting in and out of consciousness all day Sunday. He barely had the energy to do anything when he woke up. He went to the bathroom a few times, but had to have help getting out of bed. The tiniest bit of effort to move put too much strain on his healing incision. Doctor Owens knew that Will liked doing things for himself.

Will woke up in the middle of the afternoon. He looked over to see Jonathan sleeping in a cot near the wall and his mother sleeping in a chair near his bed. Eleven and Hopper must have been visiting with Sara. Will's friends had gone home the night before because only

family was allowed to stay with him. Mike and Julie had put up quite the protest, but to no avail. There had been a nasty snow storm late in the night, so the roads weren't safe for people to travel from Hawkins to Bloomington. The roads were expected to be clear enough the next morning for Will to go home.

A voice inside Will screamed like a frightened child that he wanted to go home. He wanted to see his friends. Another voice scolded the first one saying that it was dangerous for his friends to try to visit him. The voice of the frightened child screamed back that he wanted his sister there. She always knew what to scolding voice shot back that Sara probably needed Eleven more and his sister wasn't just his emotional crutch. She'd been through much worse than he ever had. It was something that Will had constantly reminded himself about. He'd been reminding himself a lot more frequently in the last day, since he'd realized that his childhood nightmares that sent him running to his mother or brother for comfort had been a psychic connection to Eleven's experiences at Hawkins Lab.

Will stared blankly at the ceiling and blinked back tears. The morning before, Will had been put under with the terrifying thought that he'd never wake up. His sister had calmed him down. When Mike had told him that Eleven would understand, she always did, he'd been absolutely right. Will was grateful to be alive. He wanted to be happy that the surgery was over and happy that he would recover, but in that moment, he only felt sadness.

"Will?" said Joyce as he felt her hand squeezing his. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing," said Will. "My chest just stings a little. I think it's time to change the bandage."

"Alright, we can get that taken care of." Joy helped Will sit up and grabbed some fresh gauze. Will was glad that only the initial bandage was adhesive, but he wasn't thrilled with the amount of time it took to change the wrap around gauze.

When Joyce finished she sat next to Will and gingerly pulled him into a one arm hug. "You wanna tell me what's on your mind?"

"I'm fine, don't worry about it," said Will. "Sorry I worried you."

Joyce sighed, caressed Will's hair, and kissed his forehead..

"Aren't you going to tell me to stop it with the sorries?" asked Will.

"No, Will, I'm not going to tell you that. I still think you apologize for things that you don't need to apologize for, but if you feel the need to say you're sorry, you should say it."

"Okay," said Will.

"And if you have something on your mind that's upsetting you, you should talk about it."

"I'd just be complaining," said Will. "And compared to everything El and Sara have been through, I have no right to complain. It's the old saying: no matter how bad things are, someone else has it worse. Aren't there starving children in war zones all over the world?"

"That's the kind of thing people with no empathy say. Just because other people have had things worth doesn't mean you don't have the right to complain. There's a balance between complaining too much and holding everything in just because other people have it worse. I love that you care about other people, but I don't want you holding things in when you're upset. That builds up and it's not good for you. So spill it."

"I don't know," said Will. "The surgery's over, I should be happy, but I just hate having to have people help me with every little thing. It's frustrating. But what right to I have to be frustrated? It's only a couple weeks. El was in Hawkins lab for almost 13 years. Sara was trapped in that program for eight years."

"Yes, they both went through horrible things for years and you'll be healing for just a couple weeks. It doesn't mean that it won't be difficult. And if you need to talk about it, promise me you'll talk to someone—anyone, even if it isn't me. Hopper, your sister, your brother, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Julie, Max, hell—Steve Harrington, talk to someone. They all love you and they'll listen."

"I saw what she went through, I *felt* it, Mom," said Will.

"What who went through?" asked Joyce.

"El. Those nightmares I used to have. They weren't nightmares, they were now memories. She told me that she could see when I was in danger before we even met. I could see her too, I just never realized it."

Joyce rubbed Will's arm. "H-how do you know they were now memories?"

"I just know. I figured it out yesterday morning when I couldn't sleep."

Joyce bit her lip. Will had demonstrated to ability to just know things when the shadow monster had possessed him. It was due to a psychic link. Will absolutely had a psychic link with Eleven. She had used it twice to calm him down the day before.

"So you know what she went through," said Joyce. "You understand and you can help her."

"How?"

"The same why you've always helped her, be the, let her talk to you if she needs to talk. Only now you know. You really *know*. You two have a special bond and have been very protective of each other."

"She's the one who's always being protective of me."

"Yeah? I've seen you be pretty protective of her. When the possibility of her exposing herself by using her powers in public or meeting Lonnie, you get very protective."

Will hesitated, then merely answered "Good point."

"It's the truth," said Joyce. "Now, here's what going to happen: You're going to take it very easy while you're recovering, you're going to get back on your feet and you're going to live your life. Everything is crappy now, but it *will* be alright."

## 8. Chapter 8

### Chapter Eight

Will wasn't sure where he was when he woke up. He gazed up at the ceiling. It was the ceiling in his living room. He was home, but was he? He had no memory of coming home from the hospital after his surgery. He closed his eyes. Wherever he'd been sleeping on felt unfamiliar. Will felt the sides with his hands. Arm rests. It was the new La-z boy recliner Hopper had purchased and had delivered while they were all in Bloomington.

*"This should help keep you comfortable while you're recovering, Buddy. Of course, once you're better, I'm using this chair to watch football games."*

Will remembered Hopper saying the last part with a twinkle in his eyes. He remembered chuckling at his step father's little joke. The La-Z Boy was much more comfortable for Will than the sofa. The drawback was that Will couldn't pull the lever to put down the foot rest when he wanted to get up.

Will started to remember coming home that morning. He'd fallen asleep on the way back and vaguely remembered Hopper or Jonathan lifting him out of the truck and carrying him to the house because he was groggy and the driveway was slippery. Mike and Julie were both working until the afternoon.

Will heard his family and friends talking in the dining room, clearly trying to keep their voices down. Curious about what they were going to say, he decided to pretend he was still sleeping. He opened his eyes just a little as Luke jumped up onto the chair with him. The cat circled three times, kneaded Will's upper leg for a few seconds, then curled up on Will's lap as he purred and flopped his tail contently. Leia did the same after a minute. Will carefully looked over to see that Chester and Buttons were both sleeping next to the chair. Will felt a small smile on his lips. Having the pets there helped assure him he wasn't dreaming, he was really home. He resisted the temptation to pet the cats as he was still pretending that he was asleep.

"We promised we'd go see Sara Wednesday, she wants to see you too, Mom," said Eleven.

"I know, sweetheart, but we can't leave Will alone here," said Joyce.

"We'll figure it out," said Hopper. Will felt tears forming in his eyes. He was already causing trouble for his family.

"I'll stay with him," Mike volunteered.

"Mike, we have to have lunch with Uncle Jack and Aunt Claire," said Nancy.

"I don't want to see them... ever again," said Mike.

"Neither do I," said Nancy. "But that was the deal Dad made with us so we can spend Christmas here."

"I can stay with Will," said Jonathan. "I don't think your aunt and uncle like me very much anyway."

"That's a testament to your good character, he only like douches," said Mike sourly.

"They were pretty insistent that you be there, Jonathan," said Nancy. "But under the circumstances, I'm sure they'd understand."

"You don't have to do that, you know. I'll be here," said Julie. Her parents had agreed to let her stay with Will's family for Christmas while they out of town to visit had told Will that they had agreed when she broke down crying after they'd given her another lecture the week before because they were still worried about their classmate Amy getting pregnant. Julie had already been on edge because she was worried about Will' surgery. Her parents felt bad about driving her to tears. Joyce and Hopper certainly weren't going to deny any request Will made, within reason and that was within reason.

"Julie, honey, that could be a lot for you to handle on your own," said Joyce.

"I want to do it. Besides, I logged over 100 volunteer hours at the hospital over the summer and have been volunteering a couple hours

a week since school started. I've had to help a lot of very demanding patients. Helping Will, should be super easy compared to that, especially since he's always trying to not be a burden on anyone. I can handle it, Mrs. Hopper."

Will heard his mother tapping her fingers on the table. "That sound like a decent plan, Joyce," said Hopper.

"Alright," said Joyce.

"I'll add that I'd still prefer to stay here with Will than go to Uncle Jack and Aunt Claire's," said Mike.

"Mike!" said Nancy.

"What? Will's more like family to me than Dad's brother and his crappy kids ever were," said Mike.

The phone rang and Will heard Hopper answer it. When he hung up, he told the others that he had to check something at the station.

"Are you sure you don't mind staying here while I'm at work tomorrow, Jonathan?" asked Joyce.

"It's fine, Mom," said Jonathan.

"I just don't want you to miss out on seeing your friends while you're in town."

"I've made closer friendships in New York than I made in all my years in Hawkins with the exception of Nancy. Besides, I was mainly coming home to see you, Will and El; so I'm not really missing out on anything."

Will started to feel like he had to pee, but decided to wait a couple more minutes before alerting the people in the kitchen to the fact that he was awake. He silently prayed that they would change the topic away from him. After five more minutes, the pressure on his bladder became too much. He groaned as he sat up and within seconds, he was surrounded by six other people.

"Hey, sweetheart," said Joyce as she knelt beside him and caressed



his hair. "How are you feeling? Can we get you anything?"

"I'm okay," said Will as he stifled a yawn. "I just really have to pee." Eleven grabbed Luke and Leia off of Will's lap while Joyce pulled the lever to get the footrest down. Jonathan and Mike rushed forward to help Will to his feet.

"It's probably about time to change the bandage," said Joyce as she checked her watch.

"I can take care of that," Mike quickly volunteered.

"Thanks, Mike," said Will. "I'll let you know when I'm done peeing." Will managed to walk to the bathroom on his own as his legs were still perfectly functional. The doctors had told him to wait a week or two before trying to go up the stairs on his own. Will closed the bathroom door and turned on the fan.

Will felt a small tinge of guilt for not saying more to everyone and made a mental note to try to not get so irritated at the people who cared about him looking at him in concern. He *had* just heard them eagerly volunteering to be the person to stay with him and help him. He winced as he flushed the toilet, then winced again as he turned on the water to wash his hands.

"Mike?" said Will as he cracked the door. He sat on the stool next to the vanity as Mike came in carrying the gauze kit from the hospital.

"Ready?" asked Mike as he set the kit next to the sink and closed the door. Mike shook his head before Will could answer. "Sorry, dumb question."

Will shrugged, then smiled before gingerly pulling off his shirt. He lifted his arms so Mike could unwrap the gauze. It was a routine he followed every 4-6 hours since Saturday. His mother, Jonathan, Eleven and Hopper had all taken turns in the hospital, but this was his first time changing the bandages at home. Everyone seemed eager to volunteer to help him with that. Will felt grateful to them even if it was an awkward aspect of his recovery.

Will made a face as he peeled off the inner gauze and dropped it in

the trash can. He then stared at a cup on the sink as Mike tried to be as gentle as possible as he cleaned around the stitched up incision with soapy water and patted it dry with a fresh towel from the hospital.

"Mike?" said Will as Mike began applying the topical antibiotics with a q-tip.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to apologize for how I acted Saturday morning."

"Apologize?" asked Mike as he looked confused. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"It's just... When I was getting ready for the surgery, I kept thinking about how I wish I'd talked to you when we were sitting on the stairs or said more to everyone on the ride to Bloomington or in the waiting room. I suddenly felt terrified that I wouldn't wake up and wouldn't get to tell everyone how much they all meant to me." Will felt tears forming in his eyes

Mike set down the ointment and pulled Will into a side way hug so he wouldn't brush against the incision. "I know, El told me. She said she did some sort of telepathy to help you relax and saw it all."

"Yeah...she'd did something she's never done before, like we were communicating without words," said Will. A thought occurred to him as he made a mental not to talk to his sister later.

"Will, what is it?" asked Mike.

"I dunno, just musing," said Will.

"Muse away," said Mike. "But do it with your arms in the air so I can re-wrap this dressing."

Will chuckled and raised his arms while Mike gently placed the white gauze over the incision and started wrapping the beige gauze around Will's torso.

"I think I have a gift for this," said Mike as Will pulled his tee shirt

back over his head.

Will started to help Mike put away the supplies into the kit. "You don't have to-" Mike started to say.

"I want to," said Will. "These are among the few items that I'm allowed to lift."

"I'll humor you," said Mike dryly.

"Mike?" asked Will as Mike closed the latches on the kit.

"Yeah?"

"Are you still having the nightmares?" asked Will

Mike snapped the final latch and bit his lip. "Once in a while, yes. But, you're in much better condition than you are in those nightmares, so that's good."

"I guess we know you aren't an oracle," said Will.

"I really don't want to be one in this case," said Mike.

"I don't want you to be one either... not in this case," said Will. He understood in that moment why his family and friends were eagerly volunteering to help him so much: they weren't trying to baby him, Will had simply has several close calls and they needed to reassure themselves that he was alright. "Ever since I woke up from the surgery, I've been a little disoriented every time I wake up."

"Oh?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, when I woke up in that chair a few minutes ago, I couldn't remember coming home at first. I couldn't remember the Hopper getting chair I was sleeping in either. It's a really weird feeling."

"Sounds like it."

"But I have another feeling-maybe this," Will indicated his incision. "Will be the end of my crappy luck streak."

"I hope you're right about that," said Mike. They opened the bathroom door and walked out to the living room. Will noticed the window in the dining room. He walked over to it as though it was in a trance. He stared at the snow covered street and all the houses covered in Christmas lights. The Byers-Hopper home didn't have any lights, partly because the lights reminded them of their experiences in November of 1983 and partly because they didn't want the cats chewing on them.

Just as it had a couple days earlier, Will's breath fogged up the window and he began marking it with his index finger.

"Will?" said Mike tentatively as he put his hand on Will's shoulder. Will turned to Mike then looked around to see Eleven, Jonathan, Julie, his mother and Nancy standing behind him. He looked at the Christmas tree he'd drawn with his finger.

"Sorry, Mom," said Will. "I'll clean this up."

"Leave it," said Joyce with a small smile. "It's kind of pretty actually." Frost was starting to form on the finger marks.

"You look like you're pretty deep in thought there, Bud," said Jonathan.

"Um, yeah, just random things. Like how long has it been since we built a snowman or went sledding?" Will leaned on the wall next to the window and gazed outside.

"Almost five years, I think," said Mike.

"Hmmm," said Will. A wistful smile spread across his face. "I haven't wanted to either, but I have a strong urge to do those things today when it's out of the question." Will shivered a little from the cold drifting off the window.

"Let's get you warmed up," said Joyce as she guided him to a seat at the table. "Would you like some peppermint tea?"

Will and his friends spent the afternoon building experience points on Dragon Quest. After an hour, Will mostly lost consciousness as the minor activities drained his energy. He rested in the La-Z Boy and

drifted in and out of consciousness. Mike and Julie went home around eight.

Hopper had to carry Will up the stairs. They allowed Will to shower on his own, but Jonathan had to help him remove the bandages. When Will was finished showering and mostly dressed, he telepathically called to Eleven to help him with the gauze wrap.

Eleven walked with Will to his room, they said good night to their mother, Hopper and Jonathan on the way. Even though Will had spent only two nights in Bloomington, it felt like it had been ages since he'd slept in his own bed.

"Can you stay a little while, El?" asked Will as he carefully sat on his bed, "there's something I want to talk about."

"I can stay," said Eleven. Chester and Luke were already in the room. Eleven allowed Buttons and Leia through the door before she closed it. "Mixtape?"

"Yeah," said Will. Eleven put the mixtape on, keeping the music low enough to not bother their parents and older brother, but high enough that it would cover their conversation. She knew the expression on Will's face.

"Are you okay?" Eleven asked as she lightly rubbed Will's arm.

"I'm fine, I just had an idea... How did you see my memories when you helped me relax before the surgery?"

"Don't know," said Eleven as she sat on the edge of Will's bed. "It was like an instinct. I just wanted to help you."

"Did you see the memory of my epiphany or did Mom talk to you about it?" asked Will as he fidgeted with the hem of his bed sheet.

"Epiphany?" asked Eleven with her brow furrowed.

"About the nightmares I had when I was little," said Will. Eleven shook her head. "I think they were... now memories of your experiences in the lab."

Eleven took a moment to absorb the revelation. "It makes sense. I could see you in the ...bad moments, you could probably see me too."

"What if," Will began. "What if you could see my good memories? Like all those stories you've asked about, what if you could see them for yourself."

Eleven's face lit up. There were so many things she wanted to know. She had often asked Will to tell her about his memories of growing up. Seeing his early good memories of their mother and brother and of their friends, especially Mike. She reached over and gently rested her hand on the side of Will's face. She closed her eyes and concentrated. She saw Will sitting on the swings at Hawkins Elementary. It was his first day of Kindergarten. She'd heard that story from both Will and Mike. She saw a very nervous looking Mike approaching Will from across the playground-

"El, what's wrong? It was working," said a confused Will as Eleven pulled her hand away snapping them both out of the memory.

"It's okay," said Eleven. "We'll wait until you're done recovering."

"What? Why? You're not hurting me."

"Will," said Eleven pointedly. "Not until you heal. Now, get some rest so you heal sooner because I want to see the memories." She still up and kissed her brother on the forehead, then fluffed and stacked his pillows before holding up the blankets so Will could slide under them. He looked like he was going to protest for a moment, then seemed to reconsider. "Goodnight, Will."

"Goodnight, El."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Tuesday was mostly a blur for Will. Hopper, Joyce, Mike, Julie, Dustin, Lucas, and Eleven all had to work during the day, so Will got to spend some quality time with his brother. He felt a little guilty because he kept dozing off throughout the day, but Jonathan didn't seem to mind. Apparently Randy, Jennifer, and Tim all stopped by while he was sleeping and dropped off gift baskets before they went

out of town to visit family for Christmas.

Jonathan showed Will a magazine article about the sequel to *Evil Dead*. It was coming out in March so they planned on seeing it when Jonathan came home for Spring Break. They also discussed places Jonathan could show Will when he visited New York. Despite his dozing off, Will appreciated getting to talk to his brother without the limitations of long distance calls.

Dustin, Lucas and Max joined them for dinner that night as they were all leaving town to visit family in the morning. Will tried to stay awake and talk to his friends, but the smallest activity seemed to drain him of energy. Eleven made it her personal mission to make sure Will got plenty of rest. Given that he was considerably less stubborn with his sister than he was with his parents, Hopper and Joyce stayed out of Eleven's way.

Wednesday morning, Will was less exhausted than he had been, but the smallest physical activity still drained his energy. He was only vaguely aware as Eleven, Hopper and Joyce said goodbye to them before they left for Bloomington to visit Sara. Julie arrived a little while before Jonathan, Mike, and Nancy left to have a Christmas dinner at Jack Wheeler's. As Julie put her suitcase in Eleven's room, Will was vaguely aware of Mike sitting next to him and say that he's much rather stay there with him than go to Uncle Jack's. Will drifted off to sleep and missed Mike, Jonathan, and Nancy leaving.

When Will woke up again, he had to pee. He looked over and saw Julie curled up on the sofa re-reading *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for what had to be at least the tenth time. He smiled a little as he remembered their first Halloween as a couple and dressing like Arthur and Trillian. Julie had told him that Fenny may have been a better costume after they read the later. Their Link and Zelda costumes from a couple months earlier had been much more complicated.

"Have a good snooze?" asked Julie. She stood up, dropped her book on the coffee and knelt down next to the La-Z boy.

"It was a top five snooze," said Will lightly. "Sorry about.. I don't know, you must be bored."

Julie shook her head. "I can't be bored when I have the words of Douglas Adams to keep me company. Besides, conscious or not, how else am I going to get any time alone with you?" Julie carefully leaned over and brushed her lips against Will's as he racked his brains trying to remember if he'd brushed his teeth that morning. He dreaded telling her that he had to pee. He knew she wouldn't care, but it was awkward enough asking his family members for help, let alone his girlfriend.

"Um," Will began. Julie put her hand on his mouth.

"I'll pull the lever. Ready?" Will nodded. Julie walked around to the other side of the recliner and pulled the lever so Will could ease himself out of the chair. "Hopper left some money for pizza. Want me to order it?"

"Sure," said Will as he stood up and headed to the bathroom. Julie picked up the phone.

"I'll be in to help change the gauze after I finish ordering," Julie called.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"You should come stay with us for Christmas," said Eleven to Sara as Hopper, Joyce, and Diane were talking to Dr. Owens in his office.

"Part of me really wants to get out of here, but what if I have a panic attack or something. Will's recovering. How will that affect him?" Sara was sitting with her hands on her knees and her left foot was nervously tapping. Eleven put her hand on Sara's and gave it a squeeze.

"Will wants to help you too. If you start to panic, you can hide in my room. I think you'll be okay though. You'll be with family and friends instead of in this hospital. That makes things better, I know it does."

"I guess," said Sara. Eleven stood up, took Sara's hand and pulled her toward the door.

"So let's go ask Dr. Owens."



"What about Dad? And your Mom...And *my* mom?" asked Sara.

"My parents and Will already said it was okay with them if you wanted to come home with us when I asked them last night," said Eleven. "And maybe you can go to your mom's house too. She really wants to get you out of here."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Mike, Nancy, and Jonathan endured as much as they could of what Jack Wheeler and his family considered to be "polite" conversation. Mike was the first to reach his breaking point though.

"So your friend Will had to be hospitalized *again*?" Uncle Jack asked Mike.

"He had to have heart surgery," said Mike. "But Will's strong and he's going to be fine."

"He's been in the hospital four times in the last three years," said Shelly. "He doesn't seem strong to me."

"He's been through a lot," said Mike.

"Weren't you in a hospital with him because the two of you were in a fight at school?" ask Uedncle Jack. "Will just seems like he attracts trouble and he's dragging you into it."

Mike glance at Jonathan, who was sitting on the other side of Nancy clutching his fork and clearly biting his tongue. "We didn't start that fight!" said Mike angrily. "Will was just standing up to a guy who had been bullying us for years. That guy hit Will because Will made a joke and Troy's an insecure asshole!"

"Language!" said Ted. Mike glared at his father. Uncle Jack was making rude comments about Will when he had insisted that Jonathan join them for lunch. To Mike, it was a form of bullying.

"Isn't your mother working for Ted, Jonathan?" asked Uncle Jack.

"Yes," said Jonathan. "She's been very grateful for the opportunity."

"But she's had to take a lot of time off because of your brother, hasn't she?" asked Uncle Jack.

"She's taken a couple days off here and there," said Ted. "But she does good work."

"If you ask me, that kid of her's is a liability," said Uncle Jack. Nancy reached over and squeezed Jonathan's hand.

"You really can't stop yourself from being a douche, can you, Uncle Jack?" asked Mike. "You insisted that Jonathan come her for dinner and you've done nothing but trash talk his family. It's Christmas and you're just being plain shitty!"

"Language!" said Ted, yet again.

"Is that all you care about, Dad? What about treating people with respect. Does that mean anything to you?" asked Mike indignantly.

"You come into my house and insult me and you're talking about respect?" asked Uncle Jack. "Margaret Thatcher has a point about single mothers, and the way you're acting shows how bad of an influence Will has had on you or how bad Jonathan could be for Nancy. Don't get mad at me because I'm speaking the truth and you don't want to hear it!"

Mike stood up and threw his glass of cranberry juice across the table on his uncle's face. "Here's a little truth for you, Uncle Jack. Will, Jonathan, and Joyce have earned respect. You on the other hand, treat people like garbage and don't deserve respect."

Abe jumped to his feet. "Don't treat my dad like that. He's right about your stupid friend. I hope Will's incision gets an infection and he dies, then maybe you won't have his bad influence, Mike."

Jonathan leapt to his feet, his face was bright red. Mike was faster. He ran around the table and knocked Abe to the floor, then started punching his face. Holly covered her ears with her hands and started crying while Jonathan and Nancy rushed over to pull Mike off of Abe.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"In my objective, these are the best gingerbread houses ever made," said Julie as she and Will sat at the kitchen table put the finishing touches on their gingerbread village.

"Well, if your opinion is objective, that makes it an indisputable fact," said Will as he cleaned some frosting off his hand with a paper towel.

"I think this is at least a four person job to move this," said Julie. "We should probably wait until the others get back."

"You're probably right," said Will. They got up and washed their hands before going back to the living room. The two dogs and two cats that belonged to Will and his sister had constantly followed him around since he'd gotten back from the hospital. That afternoon was no exception. When Will and Julie sat down on the sofa, the two dogs situated themselves at Will's feet while the cats rested on the crest of the sofa and began to flop their tails.

Julie picked up the remote and began flipping through the channels. They settled on *Gremlins*, but didn't pay much attention to the movie. Will felt tired, but also felt that he'd spent too much time sleeping in the past few days. Julie reached over and playfully messed up his hair. He looked over at her. She curled up next to him, but not actually touching him thanks to the healing incision on his chest. Her head was leaning on the cushion next to him and she had a smile, affectionate smile.

Will reached over and took Julie's hand. They interlaced their fingers. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Um, just...I love you," said Julie with a blush. Will was silent for a few seconds. Julie bit her lip and looked away. Will quickly found his nerve again. He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed.

"I-I love you too," said Will. Julie looked back at him and smiled.

"I think this is the first time we've said it out loud."

"Yeah, well, I've *felt* it for a while," said Will. "I've just never been great at speaking my feelings out loud."

"Well, you're good at plenty of other things," said Julie. She carefully

leaned over and kissed him. Will pulled his legs up onto to sofa so he could sit up on his knees as he gingerly turned to face her. It was the first time since the surgery that they had an opportunity to cuddle or make out, but thanks to Will's delicate condition, they had to be very careful.

Will steadied himself with one hand and caressed Julie's cheek with the other before leaning in and kissing her. Normally, they would have pulled each other closer, but had to awkwardly rest their hands on one another's shoulders. Neither of them minded as they were both grateful for some time alone.

Julie's more creative impulses took over. She moved her hand down from his shoulder, lifted his tee shirt a little and ran her fingers across his abdomen.

"Hey, that tickles!" said Will as he rested his forehead on Julie's.

"Good," said Julie. "It's a scientific fact that laughter strengthens the immune system. I'm trying to help you get better."

"Oh, I see, it's all for my health."

"Totally! All for your health." Julie pressed her lips back to Will's. He ran his thumb along her collarbone as he felt her fingers lightly caressing his abdomen again. He started to slowly move his hand off of her shoulder when Chester and Buttons jumped up and started to bark and wag their tails. Will gingerly lowered himself into a sitting position and hung his legs back over to the side of the sofa as he heard car doors slamming and people walking up onto the porch. Julie sat back down as well, but took Will's hand. They both pretended to be engrossed in the movie and Jonathan came opened the front door and Mike and Nancy entered with him.

Will checked his watch. "You guys are home early." he said and Mike walked over and took a seat next to him while Nancy and Jonathan hung their coats in the closet.

"We put up with our hosts as long as we could," said Nancy.

Will glanced over at Mike and noticed he looked upset. "Are you

okay, Mike? What happened?"

Mike shrugged. "My Uncle and cousins were just being their usual charming selves, don't worry about it." Mike slumped back in the sofa cushion behind him.

"I think I'm going to get Jonathan and Nancy to help me move our gingerbread village and grab a pop. You guys want me to grab you something to drink?" asked Julie as she stood up and started backing away from the sofa.

"Yeah, thanks," said Will.

"Sure," said Mike. Julie turned around and headed over to Jonathan.

"What happened Mike? Why are your knuckles bruised?" asked Will. Mike looked at Will's concerned eyes. Of course he would have noticed, but Mike didn't want to tell Will what his cousin had said. On the other hand, he didn't want to *not* talk to Will when he was clearly trying to help. "My uncle insisted that Jonathan come, claiming he wanted to get to know Nancy's boyfriend, but he just kept saying rude things to Jonathan," said Mike.

"So you punched him?" asked Will.

"I threw my drink at him," said Mike. "I punched my cousin,"

"Oh," said Will. "He must have said something pretty bad."

"Only if you consider him hoping that the things I've been fearing could happen for months-years would happen," said Mike as his eyes dropped to the floor.

"I see," said Will. "Well, it's not going to happen, so I guess Abe's going to be very disappointed. I'm not disappointed that you punched him though. That is why you punched him, isn't it?"

"Yep, that's why I punched him," said Mike. "Though the whole family had been giving me the urge the entire time I was there."

"That seems pretty typical of them," said Will.

"It is," said Mike. "I guess something good came out of their new lever of shittyness today got my parents to agree to never make me spend time with them again. It's bad enough that you and Jonathan had to deal with them. I'm just glad that they'll never get anywhere near El."

"Silver lining" said Will.

"You seem to be in a better mood. How are you doing, Will?"

"I am in a better mood. It was a little weird having to tell my girlfriend I needed help out of the recliner because I had to pee, but she figured it out and I didn't have to say the actual words, so that's good."

"Sounds good," said Mike.

"It is good. It's also good that I get to spend Christmas with some of my favorite people on the planet. That's pretty awesome."

Mike grinned. "I do like the people in this house a lot better than the people living in my uncle's house."

"Anyone up for a game of boggle?" asked Jonathan as he held the box and a bowl of popcorn. Julie handed Mike and Will each a can of pop while Nancy held cans of pop for herself and Jonathan.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Hopper waited in his truck with Sara as Joyce and Eleven ran into the grocery store to pick up some last minute things for Christmas. He looked at his daughter sitting in the back seat clutching her knees and rocking back and forth. It reminded him of Will and Eleven when they were dealing with PTSD.

"Are you alright, honey," asked Hopper.

"Yeah, just nervous," said Sara. Hopper decided that simply telling her that she had nothing to be nervous about wasn't the best thing to say.

"What are you nervous about?" he asked. Sara shrugged as tears started to form in her eyes. Hopper climbed into the back seat and

pulled her into a hug. "Talk to me, Sara. I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"It's just that I sometimes get involuntary visions of bad things that have happened when I'm around certain things. A lot of bad things have happened to Will and Eleven and all of you. A lot of bad things have happened everywhere. That's probably why I was so afraid to leave the hospital, even though I don't want to stay there."

"You're right, a lot of bad things have happened. But a lot of good things have happened too. You'll be staying with us in our new house and nothing bad has happened there."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Nothing bad has happened at your mother's house either. Eleven has helped Will learn to control his gifts. She can help you learn to control yours and maybe you won't have visions when you don't want to."

"The people who bought me always tried to shock me into having them. They wanted me to be able to find secrets quickly. I don't want to know secrets. I never have."

"It won't be easy, but we'll figure it out, I promise. Do you feel every memory of everything you touch?"

"If it's something major or traumatic, I feel it without trying. But I have to concentrate for everyday things."

"Alright, that's a start. You should be fine at our place tonight and at your mother's place tomorrow."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

It was nearly midnight when the Byers-Hopper family got home from the Christmas Eve church service. Will wasn't thrilled about having to be carried or pushed in a wheelchair everywhere and it was a very chilly evening, but he was grateful for the chance to get out of the house for a few hours.

Sara had been sticking pretty close to her father and Eleven. She was

introduced as a relative from out of town to everyone who asked. Dr. Owens was still working on a plan for re-introducing her to the world after she'd been dead for so long.

Will drifted off to sleep in the car on the way back. It was another relatively mundane activity than made him feel drained in his recovery. He was vaguely aware of Hopper carrying him from the car to his room. Mike and Jonathan helped him into the upstairs bathroom where they changed the gauze, then handed him his pajamas.

Eleven and Sara said goodnight to him as he headed back to his room.

"Did you have a good day today, baby?" asked Joyce as she performed her old habit of tucking him in.

"I did, actually," said Will.

"You seem to be in a better mood," said Joyce as she smiled and caressed his hair.

"Mike said the same thing. It probably has something to do with getting to spend Christmas with a lot of my favorite people. And Mike doesn't have to see his uncle or cousins anymore, so I'm happy for him."

"Oh, yes. Karen was apologizing to Jonathan tonight. Apparently, their behavior was so bad, that even Ted noticed and after Mike, Nancy, and Jonathan left, Ted was actually demanding that his brother apologize to his children for once."

"Sounds like a Christmas miracle," said Will. He tried to stifle a yawn. Joyce leaned over and kissed his forehead.

"I'll see you in the morning, I love you so much."

"I love you too, Mom, goodnight," said Will as he closed his eyes.

A few minutes after Joyce left, Julie crept into the room and took a seat next to Will's bed. "Don't worry, I'm still awake," said Will as he opened his eyes.



"Good, Hopper wanted to talk to Sara and Eleven is down in the living room with Mike, so I figured..."

"Good figuring," said Will as he reached over and took her hand. She slid off the chair and kneeled next to the bed while resting her on the pillow. Will looked over to see Luke laying next to him with his paws sticking up in the air. Chester was resting in his dog bed.

"Merry Christmas," said Julie.

"Best Christmas ever," said Will as he drifted off to sleep.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"I remember you used to read to me a lot," said Sara as she handed her father one of the children's Christmas books Eleven liked to collect. "Can you read this to me? I know I'm a little old for it, but-"

"Nah, you're not too old," said Hopper. "El sometimes asks me to read these to her from time to time."

"Really?"

"Yes, really, and I'm glad to do it," said Hopper as he opened the book.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Do you miss Hawkins at all?" ask Nancy as she and Jonathan relaxed in each other's arms.

Jonathan stroked Nancy's hair. "I miss some of the people-most of them are in this house, but not the town."

"Yeah," said Nancy. "I almost thought I'd miss it more, but I really don't."

"I probably wouldn't come back here if it weren't for my family," said Jonathan. "It would be pretty cool if I could take Mom, Will, and El back to New York with me."

"Will and El will see it in the spring," said Nancy. "We should start

planning their visit."

"I wish we had more than a few days, there's so much I want to show them."

"We have the rest of our lives," said Nancy. "They'll come for plenty of visits."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"I want to stay down here a little longer, Mike," said Eleven as she pulled him back onto the sofa.

"So do I, but it's getting late," said Mike.

"Dad's still talking to Sara and Julie's sitting with Will," said Eleven. "We have time and there's a mistletoe."

"A mistletoe?"

"Yeah, it's right above us, but it's invisible," said Eleven as she pointed up to nothing.

"Oh," said Mike. "Well, I've heard that it's way more important to kiss under an invisible mistletoe."

"It's way more important," said Eleven as she crawled into Mike's lap and pushed him into a reclining position. Mike wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer as they tenderly kissed for a few seconds.

"Your parents are upstairs," said Mike as he pulled away and anxiously glanced at the stairs.

"Mike, it's Christmas," said Eleven. "Don't worry, we aren't doing anything wrong."

Mike sighed and kissed Eleven's forehead. "They may not see it that way." He sat up and put his arms around her as she rested her head on his chest.

"Jonathan said you beat up your mouth breather cousin today. People

should know better than to say mean things about Will around you."

"Yeah," said Mike. "My Uncle Jack's family is never getting near Will or Jonathan again if I can help it. They're definitely not getting anywhere you."

"I'll just make your cousin pee himself if I ever see him," said Eleven as she yawned and snuggled against Mike. "That's the penalty for saying terrible things about my brother."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Hey, get off of him you dumb cat!" Will heard Hopper saying, He opened his eyes and looked up to see Luke standing on his chest, but not putting any weight on the incision. He reached up and gently pushed the cat to the side. "Sorry, buddy, didn't mean to wake you. I panicked."

"It's okay," said Will.

"Actually there's something I wanted to talk to you about before Mike gets back up here."

"What's that?"

"I want you to stop pushing yourself so hard trying to stay ahead so much in school."

"I have to get a scholarship if I'm going to go to college," said Will.

"Not anymore," said Hopper.

"What do you mean?" asked Will as he pushed himself into a sitting position.

"Owens told me they're paying out a settlement to all the soldiers the MKUltra program experimented on without their consent. It'll be more than enough to pay for your college."

"Shouldn't that money go to help Sara?" asked Will. Hopper put his hand on Will's shoulder.

"You're my kid too and there's more than enough to pay for all four of you to go to school. Your Mom and I are going to keep working and living as we have been living. We certainly don't need Lonnie finding out. The point is, you don't need a scholarship to go to college anymore. I want you to keep working hard and getting good grades because you still need those to get accepted, but you don't need to stress yourself out so much anymore. You have options."

"Alright," said Will as he nodded.

"Get some rest," said Hopper. "And focus on your recovery for the next couple weeks."

## 9. Chapter 9

### Chapter 9

The morning after Christmas Joyce, Jonathan, Eleven, and Will were the only people in the Byers-Hopper house. Hopper had dropped off Mike and Julie at their jobs before heading to Indianapolis to pick up Sarah from her mother's house. Nancy was staying with her parents for most of the break. Will had developed a slight fever Christmas afternoon, but aspirin had brought it down. The slight fever seemed to have returned. There was an appointment for Dr. Owens to come to the house with a couple of specialist from Bloomington the next morning to check on Will's healing progress. Joyce had called them about the fever and they had told her that Will wasn't in any immediate danger as long as the aspirin was bring the fever down. Will had no desire to go to the hospital.

"Get some rest, Baby," said Joyce as she gently draped a blanket over Will as he settled into the recliner after taking some aspirin. "We've gotta get you feeling well enough by New Years to have that party your friends want so bad."

"It's not really a party," said Will. "We'd just be playing Dragon Quest and Mario all night."

"Maybe," said Joyce with a small smile. "But I want you to win and you'll need to save your strength because I don't think Dustin and Max will let you win just because of your recent surgery."

"Good point," said Will as he yawned and closed his eyes. Joyce kissed his forehead. She turned around to see Eleven resting her head on the arm of the sofa.

"Are you feeling alright, Sweetheart?" asked Joyce as her felt Eleven's forehead and cheeks, that thankfully felt normal.

"Don't worry, Mom, I'm just a little drowsy," said Eleven.

"It won't hurt you to get a little rest," said Joyce as she grabbed a blanket and draped it over her daughter. Joyce quickly glanced at

Will and noted that he had already drifted off. She kissed Eleven's forehead. "Mike'll be back from work in a few hours, get some sleep."

Eleven nodded and shut her eyes. As much as she tried not to dwell on the past too much, she couldn't help but be reminded of all the time she'd lost with her mother and brothers every time they made a caring gesture or showed affection for her. Joyce had showed affection and kindness to her before even knowing she was her mother. Being a prisoner at Hawkins Lab all those years, being locked in a closet and being raised as a weapon would likely affect her for the rest of her life. Every day she struggled with the fear that she might be locked up by bad people again. The number of people that she cared about increased and that made her fear worse as she didn't want anything bad to happen to them. The thing that really helped was knowing that she was no longer alone.

Joyce took a seat next to Jonathan at the kitchen table. "Let me see your pictures."

"You've seen them twice already," said Jonathan with a chuckle.

"Well, they're really good, I'm so proud of you, and I want to see them again. Mother's prerogative," said Joyce. The phone rang before Jonathan could open his portfolio. Joyce briefly considered just letting the machine get, but didn't want the ringing to wake up Will or Eleven and the call might be important.

"Joyce," said the voice of the person she least wanted to hear from.

"What do you want?" Joyce hissed. It took a lot of effort to keep her voice down.

"Why didn't you tell me about Will's surgery. I had to hear about it from Merv."

"Don't pretend you'd give a damn if you'd known!"

"You're still trying to turn my own son against me."

"Hopper's been more of a father to him than you ever were."

"It's still my blood that flows through his veins," said Lonnie.

"Like that ever mattered to you," said Joyce. Realizing who she was talking to, Jonathan got up from the table and went to his mother's side.

"Look, Joyce, I'm in town. I want to see our son, our *sons*. I heard Jonathan was in town too."

"My sons," said Joyce through gritted teeth. "And the last time you saw Will, you sold him to a bunch of mad scientists. You're not getting anywhere near him." Joyce would have normally hung up the phone, but knowing that Lonnie was in town and not 90 miles away changed things. She didn't want anything causing stress for Will and really didn't want Lonnie to know about Eleven.

"Mom." Joyce and Jonathan looked over to see Will and Eleven standing in the area between the kitchen and living room. Their dogs and cats were right behind them. Joyce covered the mouth of the phone.

"Will, honey, go back to sleep," said Joyce. She didn't dare risk saying Eleven's name out loud if there was a chance Lonnie could hear her say it.

"It's okay, Mom, I'll talk to him," said Will as he walked over to Joyce and held out his hand for the phone.

"Will, you don't have to do this," said Jonathan.

"I know I don't," said Will. "Trust me, I got this."

"Alright," said Joyce. "But sit down first, please."

"Deal," said Will. He took a seat at the table and Joyce handed him the phone. "What do you want, Lonnie?"

"Will?" asked Lonnie. "Your voice has changed."

"I'm going to be old enough to drive in a couple months," said Will dryly. "Voice changes are normal."

"I just heard you had heart surgery. It's been planned for months. Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Will rolled his eyes. "There have been a lot of baseball and football games since I found out I was going to need the surgery. You've never wanted to be bothered when games are on."

"That's your mother talking."

"Nope, It's me talking. You've barely been around in the last seven years, but even you should be able to tell the difference," said Will.

There was a brief pause. "So, what else has been going on with you?"

"I've been working to save up for a car. Hopper-my father- has been showing me how to change the belt, the oil, the tires, you name it. He's a really good teacher."

"You've never been interested in that kind of stuff," Lonnie scoffed.

"I wasn't interested when the person trying to teach me was constantly calling me an overly sensitive little fag," said Will.

"That's in the past, Will. I'd like to see you."

"We both know that isn't true," said Will lightly. "You're putting on a show for your friends, that's all."

"Will-"

"Here's an idea," said Will. "Since you're already lying to your buddies and pretending to give a crap about me, just lie to them again: leave for a couple hours and just tell them you were visiting me. If you are thinking of coming anywhere near here, just remember my father is the chief of police. You can't look so good in front of your buddies if the guy you used to beat up when he was a kid throws you in jail." Will stood up and hung up the phone.

"I think you enjoyed that," said Jonathan as he guided Will back to the chair.

"I can hide if he comes," said Eleven.

"He won't," said Will.



Joyce grabbed the thermometer from the drawer under the counter. "Let's see if that aspirin's working yet, Baby." Will didn't resist as Joyce put it in his mouth. Eleven giggled.

"What?" asked Will, though it was more of a slight noise as his mouth was holding the thermometer.

"You're the youngest, so you're the baby of the family. You're my baby brother," said Eleven. Will rolled his eyes. "It's true."

After a couple minutes, Joyce took out the thermometer to check it. "Looks like the aspirin worked. How about some lunch?"

"Sure, Mom, thanks," said Will. "I'm only a few hours younger than you, El."

"That still counts, and I'm going to tease you about it," said Eleven.

"Go for it," said Will with a small smile.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

On Saturday morning, Joyce, Hopper and Jonathan were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Will, Eleven, Mike, Julie, and Sarah were still sleeping. They were expecting the doctors to come from Bloomington that morning, but wanted Will to get as much rest as possible until he completely recovered. He had spent a significant part of the previous evening doing origami for the roller rink New Years Eve decorations. His boss was paying him for the work, but it was still physically demanding in his condition.

"You don't have to worry about Lonnie, he went back to Indianapolis yesterday afternoon," said Hopper.

"I know," said Joyce. "I'm just always afraid he's up to something."

"I think Will was right," said Jonathan. "He was just putting on a show for his friends."

The doorbell rang. Jonathan got up and answered. Nancy was there with Karen and Holly. Karen was carrying a couple of grocery bags. "Hey, Jonathan, I thought I'd make everyone some breakfast."

"You don't have to do that, Mrs. Wheeler," said Jonathan. Nancy gave Jonathan a significant look behind her mother's back.

"It's no trouble at all," said Karen.

"Well, come on in. I'll take those bags for you," said Jonathan. He took the grocery bags and stepped aside for them to come inside.

"Hey, Joyce," said Karen as she entered the kitchen. "I thought I'd make my famous blueberry pancakes for everyone."

"Thanks, Karen," said Joyce. "The kids are all still asleep and the doctors from Bloomington will be here to check on Will soon..."

"That should work out," said Karen. "These are made from scratch, to the prep will take a while anyway." Joyce nodded and grabbed some cooking supplies out of the cupboard.

Karen didn't want to admit it, but she felt a little jealous of Joyce. It was something she never thought she'd feel was Joyce was always considered to be the weird girl when they were in high school. Later, she was considered to be the town crazy woman. The other mothers in the PTA often sneered at Joyce, particularly when she began taking extra shifts after Will went missing for a week. Karen felt it was hypocritical of women who never had to work a day in their lives to judge a single mother, but the kind of judgement Joyce often got from others was one of the reasons Karen thought she'd never envy Joyce.

Up until they were teenagers, the party members hung out in the Wheeler basement more than they hung out anywhere else. When they were 13, Mike began going to Byers home more and more. It was mostly because that was the only way he could see Eleven, but it started becoming a habit and the Wheeler house was no longer the primary hangout. Then Joyce married Hopper and they got a house that was much closer to everyone else. Mike seemed to be more and more interested in hanging out at Will's house instead of having Will and Eleven come to the Wheeler home.

Joyce had a horrible first marriage, but seemed very happy in her second marriage. Her children seemed to enjoy her company. Karen's

own children seemed to prefer Joyce's company. Even Holly was talking very animatedly to Joyce who was asking about first grade. Home cooked meals was what Karen had to offer to everyone and she was going to offer it. Joyce was a decent student when they were in school, but she wasn't fond of home economics class.

Dr. Owens arrived about 20 minutes after the Wheelers. "He's still sleeping," said Joyce. "Sorry about that. I just want him to rest as much as possible."

"That's quite alright," said Dr. Owens. "He should be getting as much rest as possible. Did he have a fever again this morning?"

"99.3," said Joyce.

"The aspirin's been bringing it down though the last couple days?" asked Dr. Owens.

"Temporarily," said Joyce. "It's been coming back in the morning. Should we be worried?"

We'll know for sure after we see him," said Dr. Owens. "He may have a small infection, but antibiotics will probably take care of it from the sound of things."

Joyce led the team of doctors upstairs. She woke up Mike, who was sleeping in a cot near Will's bed. He went out to join Eleven, Julie, and Sarah in the hall. They had all heard the doctors coming up the stairs. Eleven took Mike's hand and rested her head on his shoulder. Joyce stayed with Will in his room while the doctors examined him.

"How are you feeling, Will?" asked Dr. Owens.

"Mostly sore," said Will. "Can I walk down the stairs by myself soon?"

"We still want to be careful with that," said Dr. Owens. "The bones in your chest are healing. If you get dizzy, fall, and grab the railing on the way down, it could undo all the healing. Waiting until the end of January to lift more than a couple pounds may seem like a long time, but it'll be over before you know it. This incision seems to be healing nicely though. Looks like everyone's done a great job changing the dressing."

"What about the fevers?" asked Joyce.

"There are no signs on a serious infection around the incision. Antibiotics should take care of the fevers. We'll check his blood work to be sure," said Dr. Owens as he wrote a prescription and handed the piece of paper to Joyce. He also indicated the blood samples they'd taken from Will.

"Can my friends come over for New Years Eve?" asked Will. "And what about school? When can I go back? I don't want to miss too much."

"As long as you take it easy, it should be fine for your friends to come over for New Years. As for school, you should be back by the end of January at the very latest, but we'll know for sure after you go in for your x-rays next week.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

"We'll be back around 1," said Hopper. "Call the station if you need anything."

"We will," said Jonathan.

"Are you sure you two don't mind chaperoning?" asked Joyce.

"It's fine, Mom. You two deserve a night out."

"Any party we'd go to would have a lot of alcohol anyway," said Nancy. "And that's never been good for me."

Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Max all arrived around 9:30 when they got off work. Julie, Randy, Cathy, Tim, and Dave all got there around 8.

"Sorry this isn't what you're used to," Will said to Dave, who was one of Dustin and Lucas' baseball teammates and therefore used to hanging out with jocks.

"It's fine," said Dave as he took his turn with Zelda. "I actually like video games, but can't admit it most of the time. Most of the team thinks Link is Zelda."

"Yeah, I got that from the Halloween party," said Will.

"Think your mom will be okay us having decathlon team practices here until you recover?" asked Jennifer.

"Probably," said Will. He glanced at Sarah and Eleven who were sitting quietly off to the side. Sarah still had anxiety about being around people, but she was trying to get over it. She didn't want to live in a hospital anymore.

When Mike came, he handed Will a hand written check from their boss at Roller World. "He says he'll pay you to work on Valentines decorations if you want. More money for the car is always a good thing."

"It's a great thing," said Will.

"Want me to put that in your desk for you, Bud?" asked Jonathan.

"That sounds like a good idea," said Will as he handed the check to his brother.

"Lucas is going to have his driver's license in a couple weeks," said Dustin. "He already has a car."

"If you guys are nice, maybe I'll give you rides," said Lucas. "But you have to be at least as nice as Will."

"That's impossible," said Dustin with a mock whine.

"Nothing's impossible, some things are just really hard," said Lucas.

"I could start being an asshole if that'll make it easier," said Will.

"I think if you're being an asshole to help your friends, it counts as being nice," said Mike.

"Oh, well. I tried. Sorry Dustin," said Will.

"I forgive you. It is New Year's after all," said Dustin. "Since it's 1987, does that mean it's officially the late 80s or is it still the mid-80s?"

"It's still 1986 for a couple more hours," said Lucas.

"It's already 1987 if you go far enough east," said Will. "It's been 1987 for several hours in New Zealand and China."

"Are they always like this?" Sara asked Eleven as she watched Will and his friends in amusement.

"All the time," said Eleven.

"I could get used to this," said Sarah.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"Go ahead and turn on it on. Let's get that clean oil running through the engine," said Hopper. Will got into the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition. He let the car run for a few minutes.

"Everything's sounding good," said Hopper as Will turned off the engine. "You made a good choice, kid."

Will and Eleven had recently completed driver's ed. Joyce had been anxious about them learning to driver during the winter- and a particularly nasty winter at that- but Hopper had assured her that people who learned to driver in the winter were actually better drivers because they learned safety.

It was the first day of Easter Break. Sara was visiting. Joyce and Eleven decided to take her shopping in Eagleton. Neither Joyce nor Eleven particularly liked "girly" clothes, but Eleven was happy to help Sara with her wardrobe. Hopper had decided to take Will to Indianapolis for an impound auction. He'd been working to save for a car for a little over a year. Will had chosen a blue Toyota Corona and easily won the auction when the other bidders noticed Hopper's conspicuously displayed police badge. He also had a couple of friends on the force who may over may not have given the other bidders stern looks.

Hopper insisted on checking the car over when they got back. He wanted to teach Will how to change the oil and check other things. They had a mechanic check it over before leaving Indianapolis and it was in good condition, but Hopper wanted to spend some bonding

with Will. It was important to him to be a good father. He noticed Will grinning.

"What's so funny?" asked Hopper.

Will took off his mechanic suit, folded it and put it on the shelf in the garage. "I was just thinking about how frustrated Lonnie always got when he tried to teach me and Jonathan this stuff. We just weren't interested, you know? If the thought of speaking to him didn't make me want to vomit, I'd probably call him just to rub in the fact that you of all people taught me how to change oil and tires...to rub it in even more than I did at Christmas at least."

"Hopefully you won't have to change a tire for a while," said Hopper. "But if you do get a flat in the next couple months-"

"Don't worry, I'll get help," said Will.

"Hop, come in, Hop," said Flo's voice over Hopper's police radio. Hopper wiped his hands as best as he could on a towel before picking up the radio.

"There's been another break-in at the Star Court Mall Footlocker. The owner's asking for you personally on the case."

"Alright, I'll be there in half an hour," said Hopper. "Sorry, Will." He added as he and Will put the tools back into the tool box.

"It's okay," said Will. "Julie's coming over soon anyway to take the car for a spin."

"Alright," said Hopper. "Just leave a note for your mother or send a telepathic message to your sister and let them know where you're going."

"I'll do that."

Will started polishing the dashboard after Hopper left. "How about a ride, Mister?" Will looked up and saw Julie standing next to her bike.

"How much did you practice that?" asked Will with a grin as he stood up.

"I've been waiting almost two years to say it," said Julie as she tugged playfully on Will's shirt and kissed him. She glanced at the car. "You about ready?"

"Yeah, I just need to wash my hands," Will sniffed his shirt. "And maybe change into something that doesn't stink."

They were greeted by Chester and Buttons when they went into the house. "I'll let the dogs out while you're cleaning up," said Julie. "But hurry. You're going to New York in a couple days and our time together is precious."

Will cleaned himself up, put on some clean clothes and grabbed a couple of blankets. He left a note on the counter for his mother and sisters. "Ready?" he asked Julie as he grabbed a couple of pop cans from the fridge. He popped the most recent mixtape Jonathan had sent him into the cassette player. He drove to an area in the woods near the quarry. Will looked around nervously and tried to focus on the sunshine and tiny leaves that were beginning to form on the trees.

"Are you alright?" asked Julie as she rubbed his shoulder.

"Yeah, just trying to focus on the things coming to life," said Will.

"We can go somewhere else," said Julie. Will shook his head.

"I'm always going to remember what happened, but I'm not going to let it control me anymore. The Upside Down is gone anyway."

"Yeah, it is," said Julie as she rubbed his leg. She then kicked off her sneakers.

"What are you doing?" asked Will with a laugh,

"Making sure I don't leave footprints on the seat of your new car," said Julie. She pulled off her socks, then playfully rested her bare feet on Will's lap as she took off her jacket.

"I appreciate that," said Will as he caressed Julie's feet while he kicked off his own shoes.

"It's always nice to be appreciated," said Julie as she leaned over and



kissed Will's forehead, nose, and finally his lips before crawling into the back seat. Will removed his own socks and jacket before joining her. He threw one of the blankets over the backseat like a tent.

Thirty minutes later Julie was resting her head on Will's chest and tracing his scar with her finger. They had both accepted that it was a habit she'd have for the rest of their relationship. "Are you okay?" Will asked as he caressed her shoulder blade. "I mean, did I-"

"Don't worry, Will. It doesn't hurt anymore," said Julie.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive, but it is cute that you care so much," said Julie. She smiled, kissed the incision scar, then Will's lips. Something hit the side of the car and startled them both. The waited a minute then peaked out from under the blanket and breathed a sigh of relief as they saw it was just a squirrel.

"We should probably get dressed," said Will. Julie nodded. Once they had their clothes back on, they decided to sit outside on a tree stump and drink their pop. They then decided to draw on their sketch pads. Will loved early spring. He loved the sights and smells of things coming to life.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Julie.

"I was just thinking how good dirt smells in early spring," said Will.

"Yeah, it really does," said Julie.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Eleven stared at the New York skyline from the Statue of Liberty. Mike watched the wonder on her face with affection. He could hear Jonathan snapping pictures and capturing the first time his younger siblings were on Ellis Island. Mike looked over to watch Will drawing a rough sketch that he would be filling in with more detail later. Nancy was looking out at the Atlantic Ocean.

It wasn't Mike's first trip to New York. He'd been there on a family vacation years earlier. He was enjoying and appreciating it a lot more

now that he was there with Will and Eleven instead of his Wheeler cousins.

"This is pretty incredible, isn't it?" Mike whispered to Eleven as he put his arm around her waist.

Eleven smiled. "It's amazing." She looked at Jonathan. "I want to come here more often and visit you."

"You guys are welcome as often as you're able to get here."

"Mom was really nervous when we were getting on the plane, I could tell," said Eleven.

"I'm just glad she let us come. It was probably really hard for her," said Will.

"She just has to keep reminding herself that you're doing fine and you're going to be alright," said Jonathan.

"Yeah," said Will. "We're going to be great." He gazed out at the city and focused on all the life in it and all the life he had ahead of him. The Byers and Wheeler siblings were blissfully unaware of the man in the crowd quietly observing them.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*And that's the end of this story. I wrote several versions of the final chapter that were crap and settled on this one. Anyway, if you want to see what happens next- by next, I mean ten years later, check out Beyond the Ripple. You can also check out my AU fic that is an alternate version of Season one and MKUltra Ripple called Through the Portal. I'm also fixing some grammar errors and adding extra scenes in MK Ultra Ripple. Trying to finish it all before season threes proves all my theories wrong.*